

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Tuesday, 04 June 2024

19:30pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Rajinder Atwal
 David Beattie
 Deborah Croxton
 Gary Harding
 Alan Metcalf
 Christina Rolles

Sarah Parfitt	Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight	Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services)
James Larkin	Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
Preeti Lalli	Head of Information Governance (& DPO)
Jackie Baker	Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager
Ben Clarke	Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Hart, Cllr Ben Sizer and Cllr Hills. Cllr Debroah Croxton and Cllr Alan Metcalf attended as their respective substitutes

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 21 March 2024 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Information Governance Annual Report 2023-24

The Committee was provided with an overview of the current arrangements within the council to strategically manage information, including compliance with key standards.

The Head of Information Governance (& DPO) guided Members through the report and outlined key points for Members to note:

- The Councils annual outturn (average) for Freedom of Information and Environmental Information requests was 90.5% which met the target set by the ICO (90% and above)
- In February 2024, Gravesham saw a reduction in information requests received and after investigation, it was discovered that Medway mail servers were blocking emails sent from Gravesham's FOI mailbox. That resulted in a delay in requests being

received by the IG team and service areas. The issue was quickly rectified by Medway's IT team, and mitigation steps were put in place to prevent any reoccurrence

- During 2023-24, the council recorded 21 data incidents however only one met the threshold for reporting to the ICO. The ICO concluded that there were appropriate measures in place to ensure the impact (if any) on data subjects' rights and freedom was reduced. There was no further action required on the part of the council
- Paragraph 11.4 of the report set out the main priorities for the Information Governance Team over the next year

The Chair thanked the Head of Information Governance (& DPO) for the positive report.

5. Universal Credit update

The Committee were given a verbal update on the latest developments on a managed migration of cases to Universal Credit.

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) outlined the following key points:

- The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) had been looking to migrate cases for a number of years however, it was deferred on several occasions for different reasons. In 2018 there were just over 6500 cases on Housing Benefit in Gravesham and since then cases had naturally migrated as new claims had been made to DWP for Universal Credit which replaced housing benefit claims. There were exceptions to this in respect of claimants who were of pension age or were in receipt of temporary accommodation or supported accommodation where they needed to still apply for housing benefit. As at 1 April 2024 there were 3064 housing benefit cases which was a reduction in the caseload of 53%
- It had been confirmed that certain benefits would be moved under a managed migration to Universal Credit, under a single payment, by September 2024:
 - Child Tax Credit
 - Working Tax Credit
 - Housing Benefit
 - Income Support
 - Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
 - Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- A letter (called a migration notice) was being sent to all people who were in receipt of the aforementioned benefits advising them that they needed to claim universal credit instead as well as instructions on how to submit a claim and the deadlines to submit their claims by
- The benefit recipients would not be moved onto Universal Credit automatically. Once they have received a Universal Credit Migration Notice letter, they had to make a claim for Universal Credit to continue to receive financial support. The deadline to make the claim was three months from the date the letter was sent out. If they did not apply within the 3 months, they risked their benefits being stopped after the 'expiry date'.
- Their current benefits would end as soon as they submitted their claim for Universal Credit and they would not be able to go back onto the existing benefit once they had claimed

- DWP had provided the council with a toolkit to help signpost where a claimant could seek help
 - In completing their Universal Credit application or
 - Where they had concerns about managing their income until they received their first Universal Credit payment (for instance they could ask for some of their payment in advance)
- The service was working with the communications team utilising the DWP toolkit to publicise those changes via the Councils website and social media, providing information on what they needed to do and signposting to where they could obtain help from the DWP (free telephone line, or local Job Centre, gov.uk or independent support from Citizens Advice)
- From the council's perspective it was estimated that of the 3,064 housing benefit claims, 600-700 cases would be migrated by the end of September with a similar number migrating after September in respect of ESA only
- Whilst the amount of housing benefit cases had reduced the team's workload may increase due to the possibility of notification of changes to UC income on a monthly basis (as opposed to an annual basis) which then needed to be assessed to see if it affected the individuals claim for Council Tax Reduction scheme. The number of CTR cases was slowly increasing and currently stood at 6,700 claims

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) outlined the importance of a claimant not doing anything until they received a migration letter from DWP as they may not be eligible for any transitional financial protection if they applied before. Members were encouraged to advise any claimants in their constituencies to complete the migration letter within the timescale to ensure they were entitled to transition financial protection. If they had any queries, they must go via one of the listed methods to contact DWP or seek independent advice via Citizens Advice.

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) and the Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager fielded questions from Members and explained that:

- LIFT (Low Income Family Tracker) was based on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme base and could be used to identify those on the poverty threshold, but it would not identify all the claimants that would be moved to universal credit. There was a data sharing agreement between the Council and the DWP to be aware of certain specific benefits which gave some indicator as to who would be affected by the change, but official notification would not be received from the DWP about all of those cases
- There were no issues with GPDR, the DWP wouldn't share a list up front of cases that would receive the migration letters as they had different cohorts on a timetable which was set out on their website. If the DWP sought help from the Council, then there may be some overlap which would inform the Council of some cases; in addition, the Council would be aware of any claims made to HMRC and then stop the housing benefits
- It was difficult to know if households had certain disabilities if they had not made the Council aware of them; households with known communication issues, residents with known disabilities and ones that provided no responses would be actively contacted. LIFT flagged to the team, households that may be entitled to benefits that they were not currently claiming, and those households would be signposted to the relevant service. The Council signposted as many residents as possible using the DWP toolkit

and the Council would follow up on any referrals from services that assisted residents with disabilities

- The Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager held regular meetings with the Local Liaison Officer from the DWP and could raise issues with specific groups of people with them to see if they could provide any information or support as they faced similar issues with their claimants
- The DWP completed trials with small cohorts to test their success rate before circulating mass letters

The Chair thanked the officers for an informative update.

6. Corporate Performance Report: Q4 2023-24

The Committee was provided with a report that gave an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Four 2023-24 (January to March 2024).

Appendix 1 to the report provided Members of the Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee with an overview of the council's performance against the Corporate Plan for Quarter Four 2023-24, covering the period January to March 2024.

The Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services), the Head of Information Governance (& DPO) and the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service guided Members through appendix one and highlighted key points from their respective service areas.

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service added that there was an error in the report concerning the Counter Fraud Team cashable savings: the actual cashable savings figure was approximately £188,310 in the form of additional council tax, housing benefit overpayments and temporary accommodation costs identified during the year.

The Director (Corporate Services) directed Members to 'PI 54 – % of Corporate Improvement Programme savings target delivered' which was a new performance indicator introduced under the new corporate plan. The PI was intended to assist the Committee with monitoring the delivery of one of the five key workstreams, under the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), to balance the budget. The Corporate Improvement Team (CIT) had brought forward new areas for review; at the last Cabinet meeting a decision was considered with regards to reviewing the Sports & Leisure area. The indicator at 4.6% for Q4 was reflective of the delivery of one of the outcomes from the CIT review of Community Safety taken as a 'minded-to' decision by the Cabinet made last year. Members were informed that there would be a report submitted at the next Cabinet meeting seeking to provide information on the changes to the council's financial position over the last four years, actions taken so far to respond to this alongside further information to Members on how the required £3.7 million savings to the council's budget would be delivered under the wider plans set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

In response to a Members question, concerning how blocking a right to buy prevented losses of £96,000, the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service explained that the £96K was the discount the person would have received if the house was sold under right to buy. The person in question was blocked from buying the house as it was linked to one of two houses recovered; the person was in breach of their tenancy by not living in the house. In reality, the savings probably far exceed the £96K as it would cost the Council more to replace the property being sold but the discount figure is used for illustrative purposes.

In response to a Members question, concerning why no comparison national data was available for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the Interim Assistant Director (Corporate Services) explained that the CTRS was a local scheme whereas housing benefit was a national scheme administered by the DWP.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:00pm.