

Performance & Administration Committee

Thursday, 05 July 2018

7:30pm

Present:

Cllr Derek Shelbrooke (Chair)

Cllrs: Harold Craske
Brian Francis
Rob Halpin
Gary Harding
Bronwen McGarrity
Jordan Meade
Peter Scollard

Ben Turner	Corporate Performance Manager
Glen Pritchard	Assistant Local Taxation Manager
Jackie Baker	Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant

20. Apologies

Apologies of absence were received from Cllr Conrad Broadley and Cllr John Knight (Vice-Chair).

The Chair was advised that Cllr Narinder Singh Thandi was running late but unfortunately did not make it to the meeting.

21. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 27 March 2018 were signed by the Chair.

22. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

23. Corporate Performance Update – Quarter Four 2017-18

Further to minute 18 (27.03.2018) the Corporate Performance Manager presented Members with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as set out within the council's Corporate Plan 2015-19, for Quarter Four 2017-18 covering the period January to March 2018.

The Corporate Performance Manager advised the Committee that it was a standard report that is brought to the Committee every quarter to update them on the performance of the work carried out within the Portfolio. He gave a brief overview of the layout and what the performance measures and performance indicators were as well as what they outlined in the report.

The Portfolio has traditionally been one of the highest achieving and, as a result, has seen a period of increasingly challenging targets being adopted for the services involved. The results of Q4, many of which present year-end outturns, reflect those targets and have been impacted primarily by a number of external factors.

The Chair advised that each policy commitment would be looked at giving officers a chance to update Members further on the work that was involved in calculating the performance results as well as feedback on the relevant departments.

1. Underpin all council activity with sound governance and internal control measures minimising the opportunities for fraud and corruption

Performance Measure 41: Percentage of internal audit recommendations implemented

The Chair advised that although the percentage of recommendations implemented was the same as quarter three, eight more recommendations were made by the Audit team during the year 2017-18. Without those extra audit recommendations being implemented the overall percentage for quarter four would have been 87%, the same result as for quarter four in 2016-17. The Chair stated that it should also be noted that despite the Audit & Counter Fraud service now being shared with Medway, 91% of their annual audit plan for the 2017-18 year was successfully delivered.

In addition, the Corporate Performance Manager addressed Member concerns informing them that at the previous Finance & Audit Committee the results of an external audit into the Audit Service had concluded that the team were compliant with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.

2. Quality frontline services delivered on time and to the right people

Performance Measure 11: Average time taken to process Housing Benefit/Council Tax new claims (days)

The Corporate Performance Manager explained that the target of eighteen days was not hit but it was a very ambitious target, with the service having faced a number of external challenges through the year. Key staff were lost as a result of moving ahead with the shared service knocking the team back, that was coupled with continued high levels of work being received from the DWP. The recruitment process was kick-started but it was difficult to find experienced staff to replace the lost officers. So far two conditional offers have been given but they will need a large degree of training before they become fully able to deal with all aspects of their jobs.

Members commended the level of work undertaken by the team but raised concerns over the very high target setting which they felt could prove counterintuitive to the work of the team. They also inquired about the extent of the detriment caused by the loss of the two key officers and held concerns for the future.

The Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager explained the following explanations to the questions fielded:

- In terms of target setting, UC was only in its Live Roll-Out stage for single claimants only. In the previous year the team did extremely well which is why such a challenging target was set
- Universal Credit Full Service has only recently (in May 2018) been rolled out in Gravesham. Full Service covers all Working Age Claimants with the exception of Temporary Accommodation, Supported Accommodation and families with 3 children or more. Meaning all OAPS and families with three or more children would still claim their legacy benefits instead (e.g. JSA, Housing Benefit etc)
- As a result of the increased amount of people claiming Universal Credit, housing benefits will slowly drop off in the future. Universal Credit is a benefit that is administered by the DWP rather than the Council
- The rollout of Universal Credit Live Service actually had less impact on the team than losing two key officers.. As it stands some members of the team are working overtime on Saturday mornings to help reduce the workload. As the new officers are trained they will be taught areas that the team will primarily be dealing with in the future; the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the scheme for pensioners. They will be employed as trainees but once full training has been carried out they will progress to Benefit Assessors

3. Work to maximise income collection through the robust management and recovery of debts owed to the council

Performance Measure 9: Percentage of Council Tax collected

The Assistant Local Taxation Manager gave a brief overview of the work the team had carried out over the year stating that the challenging target of 97% had been achieved and the team was constantly looking for ways to improve the efficiency of the service. He explained the continued pursuance of switching customers to direct debit forms of payment and the success of E-Billing, with over 7,000 accounts signed up already.

Upon questioning of the company who provided a specialist service to recover Council debts (page 15), the Assistant Local Taxation Manager explained that a firm of solicitors were hired. They specialise in the later stages of bankruptcy and debt collection and work on a 'No Win No Fee' basis; some of the people haven't paid their Council Tax for years and it has proved very fruitful having a firm of solicitors contacting them with payments collected.

Upon questioning of the dip in Business rates, the Assistant Local Taxation Manager advised that the team received the best collection rate of 99% in 2016-17 and the high target of 99% was set to mimic that achievement. The market is extremely volatile however and one account in March was found to have an error on its account cumulating in an additional £145,000 which could not be collected in time to be put into the quarter 4 results. If that account had been fully collected then the percentage would have sat at 98.6%, only 0.4% off the already challenging target of 99%.

When questioned further over targets being too high, the Chair stated that the current targets for the year 2018-19 had just been agreed in discussions held with the Director (Corporate Services). It was agreed that the target of 18 days for processing new claims was too ambitious and has been amended to 20 days. With regard to the other targets, the collection rate on Council Tax was met and the other targets were very nearly achieved with only half a percent missed in some cases.

The Chair asked that it be noted that the targets set were challenging but the teams work over the course of the year 2017-18 was very commendable especially when compared with the challenges they faced. Equally, the Corporate Performance Manager informed Members that targets had to strike the right balance; setting a challenge for the service, but one that had consideration of available resources and future events known at that time.

4. Deliver on opportunities for the sharing and selling of council services.

Performance Indicator 45: % of posts involved in shared service arrangements

The Chair informed the Committee that the shared service for Environmental Health with Medway Council was not being progressed forward due to too many factors that would impede the service.

The Corporate Performance Manager advised the following points:

- The indicator is slow-moving as merging services between Councils is a lengthy process that requires a large amount of work to be carried out
- The figure of 6% for quarter four represents two things: the first being the number of shared service officer posts in the authority and at the end of Q4 that number stood at 28. That represents an increase on the same point in 2016-17, largely due to the now shared Legal department. The second part of that figure is the total headcount in the authority which has fallen in the year, resulting in the outturn increasing to 6%.
- Recently, Cabinet gave approval to a decision to create a shared Licensing Service between Gravesham and Medway Council; the intention is to have the shared service based at Gravesham.

5. Continuously review and adapt how we deliver our services to achieve financial efficiencies and improved Performance

The Corporate Performance Manager, at the behest of the Chair, gave an update on the policy commitment:

- There isn't a major update for the commitment in Q4. For the Performance and Administration portfolio, the commitment reflects how the Council is progressing with the service review process, a key part of the council's 'Bridging the Gap' strategy aimed at saving £2.1 million. Of the £1.46 million identified by Cabinet, £1.06 million has been implemented. It has now reached the point where the identified savings are becoming harder to implement and those remaining are likely to involve a longer term planning and implementation period.
- The Q1 2018-19 report being brought to the Committee in September will have a much more detailed update.

24. Any other business which by reason of special circumstances the Chair is of the opinion should be considered as a matter of urgency.

The Chair outlined to the Committee several topics which relate to the Performance & Administration Portfolio and that are likely to see reports presented to the Committee in the future.

The Chair invited the three officers to give a brief overview of each topic listed below:

- Universal Credit
- General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)
- Citizens Access Portal
- Property Acquisitions

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:25pm.