

Revenue & Benefits

<p>TEAM</p>	<p>The Revenue & Benefits team consist of 27 FTE of which their contact details include: Mike Bytheway, Service Manager (Revenue & Benefits) (1.0 FTE - mike.bytheway@gravesham.gov.uk) Jackie Baker, Assistant Manager (Revenue & Benefits) (1.0 FTE - jackie.baker@gravesham.gov.uk) Glen Pritchard, Assistant Local Taxation Manager (1.0 FTE - glen.pritchard@gravesham.gov.uk)</p>
<p>SCOPE & INITIATIVES</p>	<p>The aim of the Revenues & Benefits Service is: The collection of Council Tax and Business Rates (Maximising income from the collection of council tax and national non-domestic rates). Benefits for those who are eligible (Provision of the benefits service including ensuring the right benefit is paid first time) including Housing Benefit and our own Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme.</p> <p>A shared management arrangement is in place with Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council for the Service Manager Revenues & Benefits and the Principal Revenues Officer, albeit this will be ending on 1 July 2019.</p> <p>Collection of council tax and business rates:</p> <p>Council Tax</p> <p>Council tax is payable in respect of each domestic property in the Borough Of Council Tax collected for 2019/20 (excluding any parish charge)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73% is for Kent County Council • 12% is for Gravesham Borough Council • 11% is for Kent Police • 4% is for Kent Fire <p>As at the end of 2018/19 the collection rate for Council Tax was 96.87% the target was 97%.</p> <p>The in-year collection rate has consistently been around the 97% mark for the last 9 years; however, collection of the unpaid amounts continues until such time as it becomes uneconomical to continue. As at 1 April, the collection rates from 2005/06 to 2013/14 are now well over 99% with the more recent years well over 98% collected.</p>

Council Tax Recovery

Some residents don't pay and are subject to recovery action. A maximum of two reminder notices are issued plus a final notice before a summons letter for non-payment is issued. At this point a summons surgery is held in the Gateway to give customers the opportunity to discuss it in person before it goes to Magistrates Court for a Liability Order.

Attachments to earnings or benefits are obtained if possible and as a last resort the debt is sent to an Enforcement Agent (EA) to collect. At this point customer will have incurred costs and will incur the further costs of the EA.

In the last 12 months, approximately £1.5m was collected in respect of previous year debts, one of the highest amounts in the last few years. The collection of working age CTR payer's debt was 84.46% compared to 82.81% for the previous year.

Long Term Empty Homes Premium

Legislation was changed in April 2013, allowing Local Authorities to charge an additional Council Tax premium on properties that had been empty for more than 2 years as a way of bringing empty properties back into use. Gravesham Borough Council took the decision to charge an additional 50% Council Tax premium from that date.

From 1 April 2019, local authorities are allowed to charge a 100% Council Tax premium on such properties, and by resolution of the Full Council on 26 February 2019, a decision has been taken to implement the increased premium.

Business Rates

Business rates payable in respect of each commercial assessment in the Borough. Amount a business pays based on the rateable value of its property.

Business Rates Collection of 99.11% exceeded our target of 99% and is the best collection rate we have achieved since 2016/17 when the same amount was collected.

In the last 12 months, Business Rates arrears have reduced by approximately £750k.

Business Rates Changes

A package of business rates measures were announced in the Autumn Budget to recognise that changing consumer behaviour presents a significant challenge for retailers in our town centres.

- A one third discount for retail property with a rateable value below £51,000 for two years;
- To grant a 100% relief from business rates for all standalone public toilets;
- Extension of the £1,500 business rates discount for local newspapers' office space in 2019/20

The retail property discount will have effect for 2019/20 and 2020/21, with State aid rules applying in the normal way, and will automatically be applied to Business Rates bills based on MHCLG guidance. The Council will be compensated for the cost of granting the discount through a Section 31 grant.

Citizens Access

Citizens Access Council Tax

Citizens Access Council Tax is a view only solution that will allow customers to view the council tax account balance, instalments due and payments made, view council tax bills for current and previous years and view any discounts or exemptions including Council Tax Reduction. Initially it is being launched without too much publicity to allow us time to test and ensure the product works as expected in a 'live' environment. However, there is still the remaining functionality of Citizens Access Council Tax to implement as well as Citizens Access Business Rates, Citizens Access Benefits and Citizens Access Landlord. In time, it is fully anticipated that the digital solution will generate savings in paper and postage as well as resourcing efficiencies within the team.

Benefits

Housing Benefit

Housing Benefit is help for rent costs and can be paid in the form of a Rent Allowance to Private Landlords and a Rent Rebate for Council Tenants. However this is being replaced for working age customers by Universal Credit. Housing Benefit will continue to be paid for customers of Pensionable Age.

Universal Credit (UC)

In May 2018, the Universal Credit (UC) full service was rolled out across the Borough. It is now in operation throughout the whole of England and as a result the Housing Benefit total caseload (i.e. the total number of claimants within the Borough) has reduced from 6,551 at 1 April 2018 to 5,518 at 1 April 2019; a reduction of 15.77%.

In 2018/19, 437 Housing Benefit cases were cancelled as those claimants have either moved onto Universal Credit or experienced a change in circumstances that means that they are no longer eligible to claim Housing Benefit.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) can be awarded to top up and assist residents receiving UC providing the award includes an element for housing costs.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS), which replaced council tax benefit from 1 April 2013, has been updated and aligned with national benefit rates each year in accordance with prescribed requirements from Government and in line with benefit rates and allowances provided in the annual uprating circular published by the DWP.

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) 2019/20 will be based on the 2018/19 scheme with amendments for prescribed requirements and uprating this is available to view on our website at <http://www.gravesham.gov.uk/home/council-tax/council-tax-reduction/council-tax-reduction-scheme>. In addition to the above amendments, to simplify claiming and administration of CTRS, the scheme has been amended to allow a claim for UC to be treated as the intention to claim council tax reduction from the date of the UC claim. That information can be obtained via the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Data Hub. A claim made in this way would of course be subject to all other rules around entitlement as a claim made directly to the Council.

The local council tax reduction scheme for 2020/21 is currently being reviewed by a group of officers acting on behalf of Kent. The aim is to simplify and reduce the cost of administration of the scheme by moving away from a means tested reduction to a banded scheme more aligned to council tax than benefits. Further details will follow when more information is available. The CTRS caseload has reduced from 7,317 at 1 April 2018 to 7,029 as at 1 April 2019.

Housing Benefit Overpayments

The total outstanding Housing Benefit (HB) debt has reduced from £5.5m in April 2018 to £5.2m in April 2019. During 2018/19 £1,660,738 HB overpayments has been raised £1,415,552 has been recovered and £129,585 written off.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

The DHP Fund for 2018/19 was £244,588 and as at 31 March 2019 £246,308 had been allocated to support residents within the borough.

- 645 applications have been received with 324 being successful.
- 86 cases have involved helping customers with the spare room subsidy restriction, 79 with the Local Housing Allowance restrictions and 17 with the Benefit Cap.

PERFORMANCE REPORTING

The Performance & Administration Committee receives details of the service's performance in relation to a number of performance indicators. This information will be provided to Members of the committee on a quarterly basis.

ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Achievements for the Revenue & Benefits service in 2018/19 relating to the council's Corporate Plan include:

New Claims for Housing Benefit were processed on average in 18.07 days which has exceeded the target of 20 days this is also better than last year's performance of 20.2 days. The performance also exceeded the National Average of 20 days. Currently new claims are being processed in 12.9 days for HB.

Changes in circumstances were processed on average in 4.6 days which has exceeded the target of 5 days this is also better than last year's performance of 5.1 days. The performance also exceeded the National Average of 8 days.

Currently changes in circumstances are being processed in 4.5 days for HB.

Corporate Performance

TEAM	<p>The Corporate Performance Team consists of x2 full-time Gravesham Borough Council officers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ben Turner: Corporate Performance Manager (ben.turner@gravesham.gov.uk)• Alexie Leech: Corporate Performance Assistant (alexie.leech@gravesham.gov.uk)
SCOPE & INITIATIVES	<p>The core function of the Corporate Performance Team is to work alongside the council's administration and Corporate Management Team to set the policy direction of the authority and support the continual development and monitoring of its related Performance Management Framework (PMF). This responsibility can be summarised as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy: design and implementation of the council's organisational vision for the borough as presented through the council's Corporate Plan, a key part of the council's policy framework. The Corporate Plan is based on a number of sources; consultation with our community, statistics outlining community needs in the borough and the manifesto pledges of the administration.• Performance: underpin the Corporate Plan with an effective regime of performance monitoring for the authority. The PMF enables the council's Members and Corporate Management Team to evaluate how effectively we are achieving against our stated objectives and, equally, how successfully the council is administering its resources. <p>Other key responsibilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Corporate Governance: design and implementation of the council's Code of Corporate Governance, the cornerstone to the council's 'local code' or governance framework. The code sets out a commitment as to the operational standards the council will work towards, and the procedures and processes by which it undertakes to deliver its adopted corporate objectives. The council is also statutorily required to conduct an annual review of the effectiveness of its governance framework and system of internal control. The results of this review, carried out in line with the core principles of the Code, inform the production of the council's Annual Governance Statement, presented as part of the Statement of Accounts.• Community Profile: a research product that presents detailed findings relating to the local community across; economy, education, crime etc. The findings from this data help us understand the type and scale of local community need and form a key part of the evidence base with which to design the Corporate Plan and related strategies across the council.• Data Quality Policy: one of a suite of council policies that work to ensure that the quality and security of the council's data. The policy establishes the PMF reporting arrangements for the period of the administration and the team's responsibility to work with services in data quality reviews and verification of performance outturns.• Policy Support: provide policy advice and support through standard products (monthly policy bulletin and 6-monthly legislative briefing) and officer support in development of wider council policy (e.g. Safeguarding Policy).• Business Planning: coordination of the council's business planning process. Service business plans represent the operational delivery of the council's strategic objectives, detailing the operational resources, risks and supporting performance arrangements.• NETconsent: coordination of a policy distribution tool. The aim of the project being to create a culture of policy compliance, whereby officers understand their responsibilities and the importance of adhering to corporate and regulatory standards and, ultimately, to support the council in its governance arrangements.

More broadly, the team is involved in a number of corporate initiatives including; membership of the Service Review Team, coordination of the council's corporate safeguarding arrangements and provides assistance in the delivery of a range of Corporate Working Groups.

PERFORMANCE REPORTING

The team is responsible for the corporate PMF and its various reporting processes. Practically that sees quarterly performance reports presented to Cabinet and specific tailored portfolio reports to the suite of Cabinet Committees. This programme is complemented with an overarching Annual Performance Report to Cabinet. Additional analysis presented to the Corporate Management Team involves:

- **Financial Indicator Report:** a report that enables Management Team on an on-going basis to understand how the council's expenditure compares to other peer authorities across its core services, proportionate to the levels of population or households etc.
- **Performance Indicator Report:** in the absence of a government performance framework, this report presents performance information based upon government datasets (housing etc) to enable comparison of operational performance against other authorities.

Specifically the core products of the team itself do not lend themselves to direct performance reporting to Members under the existing PMF. Performance of the team is currently monitored according to the delivery of the various documents and projects to timescales.

ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Outside of the development of the council's Corporate Plan and new PMF structure and reporting process, other additional achievements of the team include:

- **s11 audit:** as part of the council's statutory safeguarding responsibilities, the team has overhauled the corporate arrangements for discharging its duties, primarily through a new policy and new ways of working in the agenda. These new arrangements have been successfully tested by the Kent Safeguarding Children Board's audit process.
- **Corporate Plan 2019-23 consultation:** as part of the development of the council's new Corporate Plan, a 12-week public consultation was carried out to identify community expectations from the council and its services. Over 800 people took part, with over 2,500 individual pieces of information/intelligence received from what was a consultation fully representative of the community demographics. Alongside community profiling data, and the core pledges of the newly elected administration, the material will form an essential part to the design of our service provision over the coming four year period.

Internal Audit & Counter Fraud

TEAM	<p>The Internal Audit & Counter Fraud has an establishment of 14FTE, comprising of the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud (Chief Audit Executive), three Audit & Counter Fraud Team Leaders, eight Audit & Counter Fraud Officers, one Audit & Counter Fraud Intelligence Analyst and one Audit & Counter Fraud Assistant (SPOC).</p> <p>Contact Details: James Larkin - Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud (1.0 FTE) – james.larkin@medway.gov.uk Nikki Ashby – Audit & Counter Fraud Team Leader (1.0 FTE) – nikki.ashby@medway.gov.uk Mark Cayzer - Audit & Counter Fraud Team Leader (1.0 FTE) – mark.cayzer@medway.gov.uk Helen Thaqi - Audit & Counter Fraud Team Leader (1.0 FTE) – helen.thaqi@medway.gov.uk</p>
SCOPE & INITIATIVES	<p>The key activities of the Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Service include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing a flexible risk-based Audit & Counter Fraud Plan in consultation with senior management and presented annually to the Audit Committee for approval;• Delivering high quality assurance work focused on the effectiveness of governance arrangements, risk management and control to help the organisations to achieve their objectives;• Monitoring the status of agreed recommendations and providing regular updates to senior management and the Audit Committee, including highlighting significant risks;• Delivering an effective counter fraud service including proactive counter-fraud activity, the detection and investigation of cases of suspected fraud and irregularity both internally and externally;• Providing responsive consultancy services, acting as a critical friend and the provision of advice & information on matters relating to governance, risk and control;• Providing the single point of contact for external bodies investigating fraud including the Department for Work & Pensions Fraud & Error Service, Police and other Local Authorities;• Liaison with external auditors and other assurance providers to seek optimal assurance coverage.• Refresh of the Audit & Counter Fraud Strategy 2016-2020• Professional qualification training for staff (via apprenticeships where appropriate)

PERFORMANCE REPORTING

As part of the audit review process, recommendations are made to address areas of identified weakness in the control environment for particular services/processes. These agreed recommendations have set dates for implementation, which are monitored as part of the recommendation follow up process.

The Performance & Administration Committee receives details of the council's performance in relation to this recommendation follow up on a quarterly basis, detailing the percentage of recommendations that have been implemented within their agreed timescales.

The Committee also receives a report annually detailing the review of the shared service approach, which looks at;

- how the service is operating,
- whether it has delivered against its set objectives,
- any unforeseen benefits/issues,
- financial impact on both authorities, and
- feedback from officers within the service (newly introduced for 2019-20 at the request of Members)

ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

- Same levels of service maintained after the introduction of shared working arrangements
- Majority of key targets achieved in all three financial years since the introduction of the shared service
- Savings linked to counter fraud activity;
 - Additional Council Tax of £84,456 owed and increases of £56,673 to liability for future years following removal of fraudulent discounts and exemptions as well as penalties of £630.
 - Notional Savings of £166,000 associated with the recovery of nine council properties linked to suspected tenancy fraud and one removal from the waiting list for providing false information.
 - The loss of £340,700 prevented by intervention into five right to buy applications suspected to be fraudulent.
 - Three people cautioned and three prosecuted for criminal offences

Corporate Change

TEAM	<p>The Corporate Change team consists of two officers:</p> <p>Michelle Batstone, Corporate Change Manager (0.9 FTE - michelle.batstone@gravesham.gov.uk)</p> <p>Emma Mulcrow, Corporate Change Officer (1.0 FTE - emma.mulcrow@gravesham.gov.uk)</p>
SCOPE & INITIATIVES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Corporate Change Team provide support across the council to all directorates. Specifically, the team are involved in the following work streams:• Assisting in the establishment of new shared/joint working arrangements and ensuring annual review of arrangement are undertaken as appropriate.• Partnerships – supporting directorates in the establishment of new partnership arrangements, ensuring the annual review of the Partnership Register is undertaken and reviewing the Working in Partnership Framework as required.• Undertaking business process review across the council as required.• Supporting the council in the delivery of the agreed Service Review options and Budget Initiatives and ensuring regular reporting on progress against these.• Support for specific Corporate Projects:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Heritage Quarter Project Management support- Preparations for the LGA Peer Challenge- Elections postal vote opening process (as required)- Review of the implementation of actions to address GDPR.- Project support for the implementation of a new housing management system- Formation of a Local Authority Trading Company (LATCo)- Administration of the GRANTFinder system – identifying possible grant funding opportunities for the council and liaising with departments as required.

PERFORMANCE REPORTING

Due to the project-based nature of the work of the Corporate Change Team, there is no specific performance information relating to the work of the team itself and as such, regular reporting is minimal.

In September each year, the annual review of the Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service will be presented to the committee for information purposes.

In November each year, an extract from the Partnership Register will be provided to the P&A Committee so Members are aware of the partnerships/shared working arrangements that fall within the remit of the Committee (this will be provided to all of the Cabinet Committees).

Other reports through the committee will be dependent on specific projects but will likely provide an update on specific process review activities and general shared service updates.

ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Some of the key projects the team have been involved in over recent years are as follows:

- Assisted with the bidding process to fund, and then implement the new waste and recycling scheme across the borough.
- Heritage Quarter – supported the process for the purchase of the St George's Centre and will continue to support this project moving forward.
- Provided support to enable the council to balance its budget through the delivery of outcomes resulting from the Service Review process and the additional budget initiatives identified.

Information Governance

<p>TEAM</p>	<p>The Information Governance team consist of six officers with three posts current vacant, contact details of the team include:</p> <p>Gayle Jones, Information Governance Manager & DPO (1.0 FTE - gayle.jones@medway.gov.uk) Kieran Clarke, Senior Information Governance Officer (1.0 FTE - kieran.clarke@medway.gov.uk) Heather Corthine, Information Governance Officer (1.0 FTE - heather.corthine@medway.gov.uk)</p>				
<p>SCOPE & INITIATIVES</p>	<p>Information Governance is a framework that brings together all the requirements, standards and best practice that apply to the handling of information to ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compliance with the law i.e. Data Protection, Freedom of Information, Environmental Information, Human Rights, Privacy etc. • implementation of government guidance • monitoring compliance and improvement <p>The service is designed to assist with the application of rules concerning confidentiality, privacy, data security, consent, disclosure and access to information.</p> <p>In the event of a data breach, the Data Protection Officer (DPO) will carry out a full investigation and, if it is necessary to report to the Information Commissioner, the DPO is the main point of contact</p> <p>The Information Governance Team leads on the council's project plan for ensuring ongoing GDPR compliance and assists all service arrears by ensuring Data Protection By Design is built in when developing new initiatives.</p>				
<p>PERFORMANCE REPORTING</p>	<p>Information Governance legislation sets strict timescales by which a Local Authority should respond to requests for information:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>GDPR & Data Protection Act 2018</td> <td>1 calendar month</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Freedom of Information Act 2000 & Environmental Information Regs.</td> <td>20 working days</td> </tr> </table> <p>The regulator, the Information Commissioner, expects 90% of responses to be made on time.</p> <p>In 2018/19 Gravesham Borough Council received 799 FOI/EIR requests, a 20% increase on the previous year. The council responded to 86% of these requests within the 20 working days.</p> <p>The Information Governance Team maintains the central record of information requests and monitors performance. Performance monitoring reports are sent to Management Team on a quarterly basis.</p>	GDPR & Data Protection Act 2018	1 calendar month	Freedom of Information Act 2000 & Environmental Information Regs.	20 working days
GDPR & Data Protection Act 2018	1 calendar month				
Freedom of Information Act 2000 & Environmental Information Regs.	20 working days				
<p>ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE</p>	<p>The introduction of the General Data Protection Regulations in 2016 and a subsequent two year run in period resulting in the GDPR becoming enforceable with effect from 25 May 2018, the team has worked, and continues to work, with officers council wide, offering support and guidance to ensure compliance with the GDPR and all other information governance matters, ensuring and that all possible data risks are mitigated and the council is compliant with legislation.</p>				