

Performance & Administration Committee

Tuesday, 18 February 2020

7:30pm

Present:

Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi (Chair)
Cllr Brian Francis (Vice-Chair)

Cllrs: Helen Ashenden
Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Leslie Hills
Les Hoskins
Nirmal Khabra
Gurbax Singh

Pat Knight	Head of Revenues & Benefits
Ben Turner	Corporate Performance Manager
Linda Gray	Income Manager
Jade Counter	Income Recovery Officer
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

64. Apologies

Apology's for absence were received from Cllr Elizabeth Mulheran and Cllr Gary Harding; Cllr Nirmal Khabra and Cllr Les Hoskins attended as their substitutes.

65. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 14 November 2019 were signed by the Chair.

66. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

67. Debt Recovery Arrangements

Members were provided with information on collection rates and the level of arrears within the Cabinet portfolio and informed of the corporate arrangements to collect outstanding debt and support those who were vulnerable and less financially able to make payments to the Council.

The Head of Revenue & Benefits highlighted key points from the report to the Committee:

- The total level of debt outstanding in respect of Council Tax, National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) or Business Rates and Housing Benefit Overpayments as at 31 March 2015 was £13,060,041. As at the 31 December 2019 the total level of debt

outstanding had reduced to £12,012,410. This reduction is despite nearly five years of additional liability being incurred in the meantime

- The implementation of the Council Tax Reduction Team in 2013 was problematic as it was very difficult to collect that money from people using that scheme however the team still has been successful as seen from the figures in the report
- The total outstanding debt figures for Business Rates and Council Tax have reduced when comparing 2015 to 2019; the figure for Housing Benefit Overpayments has increased roughly by £1.7 million
- Whilst the Council has a statutory responsibility to collect those three debts, only a proportion of those debts will be retained by the Council. Taking that into account, the total monies that are actually due to the Council is £6,116,965
- The collection rates for those three debt types over the last five years are extremely good when compared nationally; over the last three years there has been a general decline in collection rates nationally but GBC has weathered it well with little to no decline over the three debts
- Page 9 of the report outlines the slew of different powers that the Council has within its remit to collect debt for Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefit Overpayments. However the powers regarding particular types of enforcement including bankruptcy and committal orders etc were seen as a last resort and very rare as the Council made every effort to work with people that had debts and attempt to understand why they had fallen into arrears
- The Revenues & Benefits Team has all been trained to deal with vulnerable people and review each case on an individual basis so that they can better understand what debts the customers are struggling with and the reasons for their struggle. In some customers circumstances they may not fully understand their financial situation and may be entitled to discounts or services which the team would advise/signpost them of
- There is a Vulnerable Person policy in place; many vulnerable people do not have access to online services and they are always encouraged to go to the Civic Centre and discuss their situation with the team members in person
- Many of the vulnerable customer cases are referred to the Council through the bailiff service, as all enforcement agents used by the Council must have a vulnerable policy in place
- The Corporate Debt Team has been very successful with their Corporate Debt approach targeting customers with multiple debts and devising a single payment method in which the payments are split between the debts owed according to priority. Corporate debt cases are overseen by the Income Team and the existing recovery officers who provide the single point of contact to the debtor. The report lists several case studies of debtors successfully paying off all their debts through single monthly payments over the course of an agreed upon time period
- Currently, 53 cases have been identified where it would be prove beneficial to the customer to have a one point of contact to discuss their arrears for multiple debts; of those 53 cases, 66% have already started paying towards their multiple debts

The Head of Revenues & Benefits and the Income Manager fielded questions from the Committee:

- The rollout of Universal Credit has not affected Housing Benefit Overpayments negatively as many cases have moved from Housing Benefits to Universal Credit thereby reducing the total number of Housing Benefit Overpayment cases

- Future communication between departments such as Housing, Housing Benefits and the Corporate Debt Team will be enhanced so that cases can be referred easily between the departments including the personal details of each case
- An update on the debt collection from vulnerable peoples/families and the help they received can be fed back to the Committee regularly
- A precept is paid to KCC, Kent Police, Kent Fire & Rescue etc regardless of collection rates for that year
- As collection rates have been decreasing nationally year on year, it will be difficult to vastly improve the Councils collection rates however GBC's collection rates are still some of the best in the County but there is always room for improvement
- A recent discussion was held with the Assistant Director (Corporate Services) regarding using the Communications Team to promote the Corporate Debt services. It was suggested that a surgery be organised for people struggling with debt although further thought would have to be given as how to advertise and invite the right people. The Head of Revenues & Benefits accepted the suggestion from a Councillor to possibly promote a surgery through Social Services as they would have first-hand contact with many vulnerable people
- The total level of debt outstanding across the Council at the end of the 2018-2019 financial year (as per figures provided by the Corporate Debt working group) was £14.2m which included sundry debts
- The number of cases referred to the bailiffs enforcement agency from the total debt outstanding figure of £12,012,410 will be circulated to the Committee after the meeting

68. Corporate Performance Update - Quarter Three 2019-20

Members were presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Three 2019-20 (October to December 2019).

The Corporate Performance Manager identified key points regarding the figures in the report:

- As the report is the first report of the financial year, it should be reviewed as the year to date position
- There is an interrelationship between the performance indicators and it is often worth reviewing indicators in themes or batches
- Wherever possible a comparison of the figures has been calculated either nationally or with neighbouring local authorities
- The reports will become more comprehensive once the new framework has had time to be implemented properly allowing further data to be collected and then year on year performance trends can also be incorporated into the reports
- The Performance and Administration portfolio has traditionally been high performing and, in the year to date, this standard has continued, particularly in regards to the Revenues and Benefits service.

The Corporate Performance Manager fielded questions from the Committee:

- Under the previous Performance Management Framework (PMF), the distinction between performance measures and performance indicators was that the performance measures were solely target based. Under the new PMF targets have

been removed, largely due to the inconsistent quality of targets that were previously used which undermined the reporting process.

- Without the use of targets, the new reporting style allows Members to focus scrutiny upon actual outturns and the progress being made towards the council's stated policy commitments within its Corporate Plan.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that whilst Universal Credit has reduced the caseload for the team they were still receiving additional number of applications for discretionary housing payments which was important for people that required assistance. Additionally, the team had to keep on top of the regular changes that occur to Universal Credit which creates further work for the team.

Cllr Craske reported an issue viewing the Corporate Performance Update report on his iPad; the Corporate Performance Manager advised that he would fix the problem after the meeting, if possible.

The Chair thanked the officers for their hard work achieving the high levels of performance within the report.

69. Corporate Register of Partnerships and Shared Working Arrangements

The Committee was informed of the Council's involvement in partnerships that were within the remit of the Committee.

The Corporate Performance Manager advised that the current partnerships that most directly related to the work of the Performance & Administration Committee were namely shared working arrangements:

1. Audit and Counter Fraud Shared Service
2. Revenues and Benefits Management Arrangements

The Corporate Performance Manager advised that the Council had a fully shared Audit and Counter Fraud service with Medway Council and as part of the arrangement a commitment was made to bring a report back to the Committee annually on the progress of the shared service. The Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Services took an update report to the Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee in September last year.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits outlined key points regarding the Revenues and Benefits Management Arrangements:

- Pat Knight took over from Mike Bytheway at the end of last year as the Head of Revenues & Benefits thus terminating the shared arrangement with Tonbridge & Malling Council and stating a new shared arrangement with Medway Council
- The Revenues Manager, Ian Johnson, from Medway Council also relocated to Gravesham as part of that shared management arrangement
- The shared management arrangement splits the cost evenly and has worked successful successfully so far; the future of the service will depend on the continued success of the shared arrangement
- There are many benefits to the shared management arrangement such as resilience, shared costs, ensuring high level of performance, an increased ability to negotiate,

sharing knowledge and experience between the two teams and the training of apprentices

Concern was raised by a Member over the surplus figure at the end of the Medium Term Financial Plan and requested assurance that the Council would carry on its commitment to find better value for money and seek further changes to improve the service.

The Corporate Performance Manager directed Members to page 32 of the report which gave an update on the Councils Change Strategy and gave assurances on the Councils commitment to improving future working arrangements.

The Chair asked that the Committees thanks be passed down to the two teams for their hard work.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:22pm.