

Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 10 June 2020

7:30pm

Present:

Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi (Chair)

Cllrs: Helen Ashenden
Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Gary Harding
Leslie Hills
Elizabeth Mulheran
Gurbax Singh

Sarah Parfitt	Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight	Head of Revenues & Benefits
Jackie Baker	Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager
Ben Clarke	Committee & Scrutiny Assistant (Minutes)

70. Apologies

Cllr Brian Francis (Vice-Chair) gave his apology as he was unable to dial into the meeting.

71. Minutes

Cllr Hills asked if the promotion of surgeries from social services had been established.

The Head of Revenue & Benefits explained that unfortunately due to the COVID-19 outbreak there had been no resources left to allocate to that piece of work but it was still on the agenda to be completed once things returned to normality.

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 18 February 2020 were signed by the Chair.

72. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest.

73. Coronavirus: Cabinet Portfolio Impact

The Committee was provided with an overview of the impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic upon the practical delivery of the respective services within the responsible Cabinet portfolio.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits guided Members through the report further explaining key points from the following sections:

- Legislation and Government announcements in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Revenues and Benefits
- Corporate Performance
- Audit and Counter Fraud
- Corporate Change
- Information Governance
- Corporate Governance
- Performance

Following questions and comments from Members, the Director (Corporate Services) and the Head of Revenue and Benefits explained that:

- The Audit & Counter Fraud process was not considered a critical service at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic so the team were redeployed to provide support and advice to other services such as the business grant support process. Additionally, they formed part of the Council's resilience team ensuring that any adjustments made to the control environment were recorded and any associated risks were mitigated etc. As the Council has slowly transitioned to the recovery phase over the last month, the auditors have been focusing on concluding work that was outstanding at the end of 2019/20 to assist the Head of Internal Audit, in delivering his Annual Assurance Statement. That Statement is intended to provide assurance on the operation of the Council's control environment and support the Annual Governance Statement
- The Council Tax Hardship Fund has been promoted to those struggling financially and the majority of has already been applied however the team recognised that there will be some exceptional cases who will require further assistance. The biggest issue was identifying those who required assistance but customers were guided to the scheme if they were in arrears. Stakeholders were also worked with to advertise the fund
- The Discretionary Business Rate Fund for businesses was £716,000 and it was created due to the number of business that were not eligible under the small business grant or retail, hospital and leisure grant schemes. The 100% retail relief fund was distributed but the discretionary fund will be directed to help cover other costs associated with the business such as ongoing fixed building related costs. To receive the grant, the business owners will need to prove that they were still trading on the 11 March 2020 and had a rateable value under £51,000 or were not ratepayers and had annual rent/mortgage below £51K. The grant is anticipated to assist many small businesses, market traders, B&Bs and Charities who were not in receipt of small business rate relief or who had been waiting to be valued by the valuation agency
- The number of businesses which have received support through the original business support grant scheme was 1132 cases totalling payments of £13.90m, of these 962 of those were small businesses, totalling £9.62 million
- The self-employed businesses will be able to apply for the second tranche of the discretionary fund; the application process is currently open and will close on 19 June 2020. After which the demand for the fund and applications will be assessed including eligibility and account checks.
- The number of new Housing Benefit claims received has increased although the performance figures for April 2020 show that that even though the claims increased the team performed better than the previous year. Compared to other Kent authorities, Gravesham has done very well; no national statistics have been announced yet

- Typically, PIs representing Performance Indicators would be used in the report as outlined in the Corporate Plan but MT agreed to create a suite of CV indicators, representing COVID-19, to ensure the performance of key areas of business were reviewed on a regular basis and the essential services were covered during the pandemic. The CV indicators also allowed officers to easily pick up on specific actions that the Council were required to undertake as part of the national COVID-19 response
- CV26 represents all commercial properties within the Borough not just Council owned properties
- The Corporate Change Team was established in 2016, primarily to help the Council drive forward the work that was required to complete the 'Bridging the Gap' activity and balancing the budget initiatives to make a balanced Medium Term Financial Plan. In addition, the Team have also complimented the work of the services review initiatives, the creation of the Local Authority Trading Company, monitoring of service delivery and other key projects. During COVID-19, their skills have been redeployed to assist in the delivery of support to the most vulnerable in Gravesham and to assist the work of the HR Team in supporting the workforce
- With regards to the future of home working, the IT team worked very hard to distribute all of the necessary laptop and home working software in a very quick period of time. There is recognition from senior management that the workforce will gradually start to return to the Civic Centre and a discussion will be had on how teams will operate moving forward. There has been some benefits for staff wellbeing from the creation of home working
- The next steps of the recovery phase includes reviewing the actions that will be needed to safely re-open the Town Centre from Monday, 15 June 2020 and to make staff safe returning to the Civic Centre. In addition, assistance will be provided to those who have been having difficulty paying their bills, signposting them to the relevant services

The Committee congratulated the Head of Revenues & Benefits for the achievement of Gravesham being in the top five authorities in the Country to distribute the business support grants so promptly. In addition the Committee asked that their thanks be noted and passed to all of the officers that had worked so hard and went above and beyond to keep the services running during an extremely difficult time.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:38pm.