



Review of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Management arrangement

**(Shared Management arrangement
Commenced: October 2019)**

Author(s): Sarah Parfitt, Director (Corporate Services) at Gravesham Borough Council
and Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer at Medway Council

Date: January 2021

Review of the Revenues and Benefits Shared management arrangement

In line with all shared service/shared working arrangements, it is necessary to undertake an annual review of the arrangement. The purpose of the review is two-fold; to ensure that the shared service is delivering against its agreed objectives and to identify any improvements/changes that need to be made to ensure the successful continuation of the arrangement.

The objectives identified for the Revenues and Benefits shared management arrangement are as follows:

- To improve Key Performance Indicators (KPI)
- Potential to review and align council policies and provide a common set of policies across both sites which could result in a reduction in training requirements etc. across both sites.
- Development of the customer knowledge-base of officers in both authorities to enable them to better understand different cultures.
- Stronger, more resilient services, able to adapt to the peaks and troughs of service demand.
- Flexible and commercial attitude to service delivery
- Greater opportunity for the Manager to utilise staff resources more efficiently (opportunity for staff to 'specialise' more effectively).
- Align IT systems and software and negotiate contracts at a more competitive rate
- Potential to explore other opportunities for shared working across the two service areas where it is appropriate to do so.

• **Review Findings**

How is the shared management arrangement operating?

1. Has the shared management arrangement delivered on the objectives that are set out on page two of the review document?

Yes No In part

- **To improve Key Performance Indicators (KPI)**

Monthly dashboard/performance reports are now provided monthly to relevant Portfolio holders providing transparency and opportunity to discuss/challenge performance.

Performance has been greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic particularly in respect of revenue collection – even so the effect on collection at both authorities has had less of a negative impact than the average for billing authorities.

Benefit performance has remained strong at Gravesham Borough Council with time taken to assess both new claims and change of circumstances both better than the National and Kent averages. Medway Council has seen improvements in time taken to assess new claims (reduced by 14.7%).

The introduction of automation of the assessment process of change of circumstances has greatly improved performance at both authorities despite significant increase in workload due to the pandemic.

Whilst not in the annual list of KPI’s the pandemic has required local authorities to administer the payment of business grants and Test & Trace Isolation payments. These significant and critical payments for businesses and local residents have been /are being delivered efficiently by the Revenues and Benefits service.
- **Potential to review and align council policies and provide a common set of policies across both sites which could result in a reduction in training requirements etc. across both sites.** This was commenced and has been undertaken in respect of all new policies introduced as part of the governments response to the Covid-19 pandemic (including various business grants; test and Trace Isolation payments and rate reliefs.
- **Development of the customer knowledge-base of officers in both authorities to enable them to better understand different cultures.** This has proven invaluable to the service with each authority having its own unique nuances which has ensured a more holistic view of the service
- **Stronger, more resilient services, able to adapt to the peaks and troughs of service demand.** Both authorities have adapted well to home-working which has greatly aided resilience with less sickness reported. Utilising different skill sets from across the two authorities has provided a much stronger service and has been fully tested in very difficult times. The service has continued and in some areas even improved performance due to automation and innovation. However, the service has not been able to remain self-sufficient during the pandemic and has had to obtain some external resilience.
- **Flexible and commercial attitude to service delivery** The service continually looks at suppliers who provide similar services for each authority and investigates where savings

Review of the Revenues and Benefits Shared management arrangement

may be made if rolled into one e.g. annual subscription, IT systems. Longer term there may be further opportunities around core IT systems hence effort to align systems.

- **Greater opportunity for the Manager to utilise staff resources more efficiently (opportunity for staff to 'specialise' more effectively).** This will be easier to achieve should the service moved into a fully shared service.
- **Align IT systems and software and negotiate contracts at a more competitive rate** Both authorities key systems are provided by Northgate Public Services (NPS). However, Gravesham Borough Council's is administered locally by the council's IT service whilst Medway Council's are hosted by NPS. These differences have been due to local strategic decisions. In addition the Document Imaging system is at different versions for which there is currently a significant difference. It is envisaged that both authorities' versions will be aligned to the latest version in Q1 2021/22 as this will be key should the service become fully shared.

2. Have there been any other, unforeseen benefits, as a result of the shared service?

Yes

No

The shared management arrangement has greatly assisted both authorities during the pandemic. Various skill sets available at both authorities across various departments (and not just in the Revenues and Benefits service) has greatly aided in the implementation of government initiatives in responses to the pandemic. Additionally shared knowledge of collection fund and other accounting practices have benefited both authorities.

3. Have there been any unforeseen issues or problems resulting from the shared management arrangement?

Yes

No

The COVID19 pandemic has had a major impact on the Revenues and Benefits service. There have been numerous legislative changes and grants which have fallen on the Revenues and Benefits service to deliver across two authorities so this has stretched the shared management arrangement. However, the support from senior corporate management has enabled this service to continue and in some areas improvement in service delivery due to review of processes and innovation.

Review of the Revenues and Benefits Shared management arrangement

4. What has been the financial impact of the shared service on both authorities?

The cost of the shared management (Head of Service and Revenues Manager) within Revenues and Benefits for Gravesham has been :-

- For period 01/10/2019 to 31/03/2020 amounted to £35,480
- For period 01/04/2020 to 31/03/2021 amounted to £74,870

These figures were as per the budget expectation and payable to Medway Council

5. Feedback from officers involved in the shared service:

In general the feedback from officers within the service is positive with homeworking being seen as a positive by the majority of staff. Additionally, staff have indicated that they are pleased that there is no perceived 'threat' of relocation to other offices.

Concerns have been raised around resourcing and particularly filling vacancies or at least revising team structures. Initially, there were concerns that managers may not be accessible as often. However this has eased since more staff are now using video conferencing .

Moving forward with the shared management arrangement

6. Based on the review that has been undertaken will the shared management arrangement continue to operate?

Yes

No

The potential to explore other opportunities for shared working across the two service areas remains with constant review of utilising and applying best practice and innovation.

Review of the Revenues and Benefits Shared management arrangement

7. If the shared management arrangement is to continue to operate, what are the key areas of focus for the coming year for both authorities?

Performance – continued improvement of key performance indicators

A review of the structure of the service is required particularly in the following areas

Management – administrative support required

- Revenues – there is a need for further specialist Business Rate knowledge; review of visiting officer requirements
- Systems team(s) – a detailed review
- Benefits – further resilience for appeals

Information Technology and Innovation

- Alignment of both authorities to the latest version of NPS Document Image system ‘Enterprise’
- Further automation of processes where possible
- Further development/installation of Citizens Access

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

- Consultation with stakeholders over a new ‘banded’ scheme

Summary of recommendations

Please list any recommendations that you feel need to be reviewed by the relevant Directors at both authorities. This may include changes to processes or potential supplement increases (if applicable) if it is felt that partnership is working well.

| | |
|----|---|
| 1. | Review at Medway Council collection fund related work currently undertaken by Head of Revenues and Benefits service to free up time for the Shared Management arrangement |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |