

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 25 March 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: Helen Ashenden
Harold Craske
Dakota Dibben
Sarah Gow
Gary Harding
Jordan Meade
Elizabeth Mulheran
Gurbax Singh

Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
Pat Knight Head of Revenues & Benefits
James Larkin Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
Michelle Batstone Corporate Change Manager
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Manager (minutes)

92. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Leslie Hills. Cllr Jordan Meade attended as his substitute.

93. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 10 February 2021 were signed by the Chair.

94. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

95. Review of the Working in Partnership Framework

The Corporate Change Manager presented the Committee with a draft of the updated *Working in Partnership Framework* and highlighted the following:

- Specific changes that have been made to the draft Working in Partnership Framework:
 - Amendments to the definition of a partnership to clearly set out the various types of joint working activities the council is engaged in. This has included revising the financial threshold for a significant partnership to £50,000.

- Provisions for commencing partnership or joint working where there is an urgent need (ad hoc arrangements).
 - Clarification of the approval process for all forms of partnerships and joint working arrangements
 - Reference to the council's revised Equalities Aims and Objectives and the requirement for new partnership arrangements to demonstrate how they are able to contribute to these.
 - Reference to the council's Climate Change commitment, ensuring consideration is given to how a partnership may support the borough in mitigating climate change.
 - A detailed breakdown of the governance requirements for shared working arrangements.
 - Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of council Officers and Members with regards to partnerships and joint working arrangements that the council has engaged in.
 - Updates to the annual review process for partnerships and shared working arrangements to reflect the introduction of a revised approach for reviewing shared service arrangements from year three onwards.
- Following review by the Performance & Administration Committee, the report will be presented to Cabinet for approval, followed by submission to Full Council for formal adoption into the council's Policy Framework.

The Corporate Change Manager fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- If specific equipment was needed in a shared service then this would be assessed on its own merit and costs would either be shared or taken on board by the host authority.
- The Corporate Change Manager undertook to look into the inclusion of customers and residents under the 'Do Nothing' Risks; and present this to Cabinet for consideration.
- An 'urgent need' for a partnership or joint-working arrangement refers to those arrangements that need to be in place within a matter of days to ensure services can be maintained/delivered to the community. The Corporate Change Manager undertook to look at clearly setting out criteria for defining an 'urgent need' in relation to partnerships, and update the Framework accordingly.
- There are some partnerships that would go from being classified as 'significant' to 'other' under the updated Framework but they will still be included within the register of partnerships and reported to Members in the same way.
- If a partnership was critical to delivery of council services but didn't fully support all of the council's climate change ambitions, it wouldn't mean we wouldn't work with them but we would need to consider their commitments alongside our own.
- An example of an 'Informal network' is the Kent Finance Officers Group that is used as an important information sharing tool; it's not formal but is very useful to be involved in.
- The Corporate Change Manager undertook to revisit the wording in relation to reference to an 'Exit Strategy' and the 'indefinite' arrangements detailed in the appendices of the Framework.

The Committee noted the updated Working in Partnership Framework and the comments that Members had provided at the meeting.

96. COVID-19 Portfolio Update

The Director (Corporate Services) provided the Committee with an update against how the council has responded to the COVID pandemic, both in terms of specific activities in response to the pandemic and how the council has managed to maintain service delivery across council services.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits highlighted the following:

- There have been fourteen different grant schemes concerning business and business rates and there will be another one from 1 April 2021
- £1.5billion will be split between Local Authorities to award in respect of those businesses affected by Covid 19. GBC should be informed how much they will receive in the next two to three weeks.
- GBC was in the top four authorities in the country for the speed at which grants were distributed. From March 2020 to October 2020 just over £15million was distributed.
- The second series of grants ran from November 2020 to the end of March 2021. To date £6.6million has been distributed in respect of seven grant schemes for that period.
- The Council has undertaken the proper due diligence with the grant schemes and to date there have been no fraudulent cases detected.
- GBC received £893,000 to pay to vulnerable people and households. The idea was to target working age claimants and provide £150 by way of credit on Council Tax. Some people were also awarded an extra £20 a week; GBC used some of the awarded money to offset the loss of benefit. To date just over 6000 claimants have received payment.
- From 28 September 2020; anyone who received a positive Covid-19 test and was eligible was able to receive £500 Isolation Payment. To date GBC has paid out £168,000 to Gravesham residents

The Director (Corporate Services), the Head of Revenues & Benefits and the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service fielded questions from the Committee and highlighted the following:

- In terms of post payment assurance; the Council recently submitted data to the Cabinet Office on the first three rounds of grants and using intelligence alerts from the National Anti-fraud Network, all payments were checked against a list of bank accounts thought to be linked to organised crime, providing assurance that no payments have been issued to these particular accounts. So far no fraudulent cases have been identified despite a small handful of referrals received. The Council is also planning further post payment assurance activity.
- The Council tried to maximise the take-up of grant schemes but some claimants didn't meet the criteria (e.g. failing to provide evidence for self-isolation)
- Checking that people are self-isolating does not fall within the Council's remit.
- Staff have been made aware that they can claim tax relief for working from home.

- The Low Income Family Tracker is a shared initiative brought in by KCC. The product takes various data sets and GBC gains intelligence about its customers which can be used to try and make better informed strategic decisions, get better take up and identify customers who are approaching financial crisis.
- The Council is commencing its work to reduce the number of people in financial crisis via a pension credit take up campaign, promoting discretionary housing payments, and improving Council Tax recovery.
- The Council will undertake a campaign for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The Council will identify those households who are financially struggling and try and assist them. This will help Council Tax recovery and minimise the amount of money GBC need to collect.
- At the end of February 2021 there was £ 50,000 left in the Discretionary Housing Payment fund. The Council will work to spend every penny by next Tuesday
- Citizens Access is an online account service for Council Tax and Business rates that allows you to check accounts, direct debits, look at balances and payments etc. The Head of Revenues & Benefits is keen to add benefits to Citizens Access as soon as possible.

The Committee noted the Covid-19 Portfolio Update and commended the excellent work of all the officers involved.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.22 pm