

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Monday, 22 November 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

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

Councillors: John Caller
 Harold Craske
 Dakota Dibben
 Sarah Gow
 Gary Harding
 Leslie Hills
 Samir Jassal
 Gurbax Singh

Sarah Parfitt Director (Corporate Services)
James Larkin Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Services
Pat Knight Head of Revenues & Benefits
Jackie Baker Assistant Revenues & Benefits Manager
Ben Clarke Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

14. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Mulheran. Cllr John Caller substituted.

15. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 23 September 2021 were signed by the Chair.

16. To declare any interest Members may have in the items contained on this agenda. When declaring an interest Members should state what their interest is.

No declarations of interest were made.

17. Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Committee was presented with information on the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme and asked to note the work undertaken on the review of the current Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme.

The Head of Revenue & Benefits guided Members through the report and drew their attention to key points concerning the Scheme, its aims, the additional protections in place, how the Scheme would be easier to understand and what was in place to protect claimants from exceptional hardship. More detailed information was available in the report from pages 11-14.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits assured Members that pension age households would not be affected by the new Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits further updated Members on the progress made on the review of the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

- The consultation document was finalised on 20 October 2021 and consultation commenced on Friday 22 October 2021
- Any individual claimants that experienced hardship from the changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme would be able to apply for support from the Exceptional Hardship Fund
- The proposed timetable for the consultation was 9 weeks from Friday 22 October 2021 to Friday 24 December 2021. Once it had been approved by Cabinet and Full Council at the budget setting meeting on Tuesday, 22 February 2022 then calculation and production of 2022-2023 Council Tax bills including the approved CTRS would commence from Wednesday, 23 February 2021
- The consultation had been live for just over four weeks and two hundred responses had been received already; the Head of Revenues & Benefits had spoken with the person hosting the server for the consultation and he had advised that it was a very good response considering how early in the consultation it was
- The Head of Revenues & Benefits had received the contact information from the Community Involvement Officer for various third party organisations that may have more information about certain groups of people to consult and the best method to reach them. The Head of Revenues & Benefits had scheduled those meetings in the near future
- The team had taken a high number of calls regarding the consultation and had provided assistance to them over the phone
- The team were conscious of digital poverty and had sent hard copies of the documents out to certain groups to make it easier for them to respond

The Head of Revenues & Benefits encouraged all Members to contact their residents and ensure that they were aware of the consultation and the need for them to complete it. The Revenues & Benefits Team were there to assist, and the Head of Revenues & Benefits asked that Members refer any resident or groups who were having trouble completing the document to the service.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits fielded questions from Members and explained that:

- The service was not monitoring the types of people that were responding to the consultation as the responses were fed to a hosted server however Members should be assured that invites would be issued to every single existing claimant in Gravesham. The Customer Services Team were currently sending out invites in batches of 500 a day, so as not overload the team, and were also issuing invitations to respond to a sample of non-claimants so that a full response could be achieved for the consultation from all different groups of residents
- Once a good spectrum of responses had been received, the Head of Revenues & Benefits advised that he would review the responses to see if there were any areas that had been missed and would require further targeted action.
- The service would be working with Communications in the near future to target communities that may not have a good response rate or may not have received the

initial messages circulated to the wider Community. The proposed advertising campaigns would hopefully mean that every group in Gravesham would be able to give their views on the proposed Council Tax Reduction Scheme

- Various methods of advertising the consultation had already taken place such as an article in the Your Borough magazine which went to all households in the Borough and various documents had been included in the Members information pack. The link to the consultation was also on the front page of the Councils website
- The nine-week window for the consultation had to be held in its current timetable and the team are considered to have enough time to analyse the results and get a report to Full Council in February 2022.
- There wasn't an overall number target for the consultation but the Head of Revenues & Benefits wanted an even spread of responses across the spectrum; a comparison between other neighbouring authorities could be conducted to see if a good level of responses had been received
- A comparison hadn't been conducted by the team but the Head of Revenues & Benefits would receive that information from an external consultant; however the Committee should note that as the Head of Revenues & Benefits was also responsible for Medway Council it could be reported that Gravesham's response figures so far were better than Medway Councils
- Ensuring that all people who may find it difficult to respond to the consultation such as residents with disabilities was a shared concern of the Head of Revenues & Benefits Service; he implored Members to pass along the details of any groups that should be contacted regarding the consultation. The proposed scheme was not about cost cutting and the team were prepared to reach out to all residents that required further assistance for any reason

Members noted the work undertaken on the review of the current Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme.

18. LIFT - Outcomes Update

The Committee was provided with information on outcomes to date from the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT).

The Head of Revenues & Benefits undertook a demonstration of the LIFT system at the previous Committee so that Members were aware of how the system worked and the types of information it stored. Since that meeting, further information had been collected and it was the intention of the Head of Revenues & Benefits to bring regular reports on the outcomes of interventions using the LIFT system to the Committee.

The Head of Revenues & Benefits directed Members attention to page 44 of the report and updated Members on the progress of the three objectives of the system:

- Objective 1: To gain a better understanding of the low-income cohort in the Borough
- Objective 2: Fewer people in financial crisis in the Borough
- Objective 3: Improve Council Tax recovery

The Head of Revenues & Benefits fielded questions from Members and explained that:

- Behaviour change techniques were cost effective techniques that we used to encourage people to undertake certain behaviours; those techniques were used in

the letters sent out to residents as a way of making it more likely that residents would become interested and read the whole letter instead of glancing at it and throwing it away. An example of the technique was the inclusion of box with a bold border, grey background and certain wording that caught their attention such as 'X amount of people receive a Council Tax reduction, should you be included?'. In the past, behaviour change techniques had been used by the Head of Revenues & Benefits and it actually improved Council Tax collection rates. The team would measure the success of the techniques by measuring the response rate of the new intervention letter compared to the standard letter

- The system had already identified that there were 66 households with 47 children in relative poverty that would be negatively affected by the proposed Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Having been identified already, those households would be proactively worked with to support them through the Exceptional Hardship Fund
- The Head of Revenues & Benefits was initially disappointed in the take up of Discretionary Housing Payments as seventeen potential claimants had been identified but as of today, only five had claimed the payments. The low take up meant that the Service needed to be more proactive and engage with those potential claimants. Officers would look to send out further full case reviews to determine if there had been any change of circumstances at the households
- The funding for Discretionary Housing Payments had increased this year from £162K to £252K; the reason for the increase was due to the Service spending every penny of the grant money every year, utilising it to its fullest potential. Due to the Councils success in spending the grant money, Gravesham was one of the few Councils that were awarded an additional £90K
- The Discretionary Housing Payments were there to assist residents with short term financial hardship; they gave people the chance, for example, to find more suitable property while the Council supported them by paying for their rent. The Service reviewed all cases that applied for the payments to ensure consistency across the board
- The system being considered for use by Housing (Xantura Project) and the LIFT system were pieces of software identified through the Financial Hardship Group led by KCC. The LIFT system aimed to protect vulnerable residents and assist with the recovery of arrears whereas the Housing System was more concerned with the prevention of Homelessness but they both complimented each other. The overlap was also beneficial as it allowed the two services to view different data sets
- The Head of Revenues & Benefits previously shared Members concerns regarding the effects of the Furlough Scheme ending but severe effects hadn't been seen in the case load. The true outcome of the Furlough Scheme ending would be better measured after Christmas as the Christmas period should help traders financially
- The Council should be notified of all power of attorneys for residents; those residents with power of attorneys would have all Council letters/documents sent to that person instead of the resident. The Service would always engage with the power of attorney where appropriate. Some difficulties arose when the Council weren't notified of power of attorney but the Head of Revenues & Benefits agreed to look into the matter further

The Chair thanked the officers for detailed responses.

19. Annual review of the Information Governance Shared Service

The Committee was provided with a copy of the annual review that has been conducted in respect of the Information Governance Shared Service with Medway Council.

The Director (Corporate Services) advised that the Council were supportive of the shared service continuing but it was recognised that there were several actions that needed to be undertaken to improve the service for the coming year:

- Action taken to enhance arrangements to demonstrate the equitable allocation of resources between the partner councils. This would enable each partner to determine the use of resources available to them, effectively manage and monitor performance and to be able to demonstrate Value For Money (VFM) against those work programmes
- Develop a suite of KPIs to demonstrate achievement of expected performance standards and VFM of the Shared Service in future years

Cllr Hills praised the Service and also praised the Legal Shared Service as he felt the newly appointed officers had vastly improved the level of service received.

The Chair thanked the Director (Corporate Services) for her report.

20. Corporate Performance Report: Q2 2021-22

The Committee was presented with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the Council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Two 2021-22 (July to September 2021).

The Head of Revenues & Benefits directed Members attention to appendix two, gave a statistical overview of the Councils performance indicators that pertained to his service and advised the Committee on the latest updates:

PI23 - Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit claims (days)

- The quarter two processing time was 14.2 days which wasn't as strong as last year (13.8 days) but nationally Councils hadn't been performing as quickly on turnaround time due to the additional work that the Service had to undertake
- The national average for processing new claims was 20 days; Gravesham were 5.8 days ahead of the national average
- The average processing time for KCC District Councils was also 20 days

PI 24 - Average processing time for changes of circumstance in Housing Benefit claims (days)

- As at end of October, the average processing time for 5.5 days which showed a downward trend
- The national average was 7 days and the average processing time for KCC District Councils was also 7 days
- The service was in the top quartile for most accurate claim processing turnaround times; far higher than the national average
- As at the end of October, Council Tax collection stood at 65.5% and Business Rates Collection had decreased by 5% from last year's figures. The decrease in Business

Rates Collection was due to the Government changing the Retail Discount Scheme on 01 July 2021 from 100% relief to 66% relief. The Council had to rebill all businesses and charge them for the additional 34% from July 2021 onwards; in order to assist businesses with the additional payments, their bills were spread out to the end of March 2022

- The collection had also been affected by limited court dates being made available as courts were clearing the backlog of court cases deferred due to the pandemic. However, the council has obtained additional court dates recently to enable movement of recovery action to a more formal stage for appropriate cases.

PI 26 - Total number of reported corporate complaints

- Of the 79 complaints received in quarter two, only three went to stage three complaints
- In line with the Local Government Ombudsmen recommendation and other local authorities, from Q3 the number of stages involved in the process will reduce from three to two; there will no longer be a Stage Three (Chief Executive) response
- It was recognised that a proportion of the complaints received could actually be considered as service user requests

PI 50 - Total number of people signed up to citizens access

- There were 10681 users of citizens access; a 69% increase from this time last year

PI 49 - % of posts involved in shared service arrangements

- All officers and nearly all Members had been transferred over to Microsoft Office 365 with positive feedback reported
- Members were encouraged to report any concerns or requests for additional training to the M365 Project Support Team
- The Council were in discussions with Ring Central for a new cloud based telephony system. Unfortunately the transfer to the new system was slower than originally anticipated due to the configuration of the system and the Council relying on the providers to transfer the numbers over wholesale to the new system; they all had to be transferred at once instead of one at a time
- The date for conclusion of the project was projected to be February 2022; it would allow officers to answer calls from the Councils office telephone numbers wherever they were working from, either through a mobile phone or an app thus increasing connectivity for all staff

The Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service provided the latest figures for the performance indicators related to his service:

PI 55 - % of internal audit recommendations implemented

- A cumulative total of 33 recommendations were due to be implemented by the end of Q2 and as of 30 September 2021, 12 of these remained outstanding
- At the end of October, the % implemented had increased to around 66% but accurate figures were not able to be provided for the meeting tonight as the service was in the process of issuing reminders for the end of November and a number of responses had not yet been received from the responsible officers.

- Members could draw a level of assurance from the fact that the number of recommendations as a whole remained relatively low, which suggested that the internal audit process had not identified large numbers of control issues.
- As of tonight, the planned delivery for Audit assurance reviews stood at 43% with a further 14% underway, which was broadly in line with where the service had been at the same point in previous years. As such, the Head of Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Services advised that there was no reason to think that the target of 95% would not be met.
- In terms of counter fraud activity, as of today, the total for the year so far was cashable savings of approximately £227,000 in the form of additional Council tax, business rates, Covid grants and housing benefit overpayments. The service also had notional savings of £93,000 associated with the recovery of a Council property.

The Director (Corporate Services) provided the latest update for the performance against the council's policy commitment to manage key business risks:

- PI56 - % of information requests completed within statutory deadlines – there had been a decline in performance during Q2, primarily driven by restructures and changing responsibilities within two council directorates. It was expected that performance would return to an improved level in Q3.
- The Annual Governance Statement was adopted at the Finance & Audit Committee on 20 July 2021; Members concluded that there were no significant control issues identified for the period
- With regard to risk management arrangements, in addition to holding and monitoring service level risk registers and the corporate risk register the Council recently formed a risk management officer working group who's remit was to raise the profile of and to promote risk management throughout the council
- In quarter two, the IG Team had developed project plans to provide focus on areas for improvement in the handling of information requests and the Council's compliance with the data protection legislation

In response to Members questions, the Director (Corporate Services) explained that:

- The reasons for the large increase in Housing Option corporate complaints were residents seeking advice and information about the new Housing Allocation Policy and their housing band being changed
- With regards to home working, it had many benefits and had allowed officers to work from home several days a week whilst still maintaining constant cover in the office. The Chief Executive approved of a flexible working arrangement and the Councils recent Hybrid Policy had gone live but he made it clear that the Council was a community organisation and officers needed to be available for residents to contact. There weren't any concerns about performance dropping off due to the implementation of hybrid working arrangements but there was a recognition that managers needed to undergo training in order to better learn how to manage officers who home worked. Members noted the Hybrid Working Arrangements were part of a six month pilot; there was no commitment to continue the arrangements past March 2022 but if performance did not drop then there was no reason to end the hybrid working arrangements
- An email will be circulated outside of the meeting informing Members what the average time was for corporate complaints to be resolved

- The corporate complaints process was amended as it was noticed that a three stage process meant complaints became drawn out; comments and recommendations had been received from the Local Government Ombudsmen about speeding up the process and moving to a two stage process. Following that advice, the Council brought itself in line with a number of other local authorities who operated a two stage process; if the complaint couldn't be resolved at a local level then it could be forwarded to the Local Government Ombudsman much quicker as well
- Regular updates will be brought to the Committee on the telephony project as part of the Corporate Performance Reports; the Director (Corporate Services) agreed to pass on Cllr Gows point about automated call pickup not recognising user voices and making the process difficult, to the Assistant Director (IT & Transformation)

Members praised the performance outlined in the report which was impressive considering the effects of the pandemic.

The Chair thanked the officers for their detailed updates.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:36pm.