

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 24 March 2022

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
 Jordan Meade
 Gurbax Singh

James Larkin Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Officer - Scrutiny (Minutes)

27. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Samir Jassal and Cllr Elizabeth Mulheran; Cllr Jordan Meade and Cllr John Caller attended as their respective substitutes.

28. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 February 2022 were signed by the Chair.

29. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

30. Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2021-22

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service presented Members of the Performance and Administration Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Three 2021-22 (October to December 2021).

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service highlighted the following:

PI 23 - Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit claims (days) and PI 24 Average processing time for changes of circumstance in Housing Benefit claims (days)

- Housing Benefit performance figures have been affected but performance still remains above the national and local averages. The service remains under enormous pressure as on top of the day job, it has had to assess and pay:
 - Test and Trace Isolation Payments (ended 24 February although residents have 42 days to apply). £593,500 has been paid to 1193 residents
 - Awarded Covid 19 Additional Relief Fund to 270 businesses totalling £1,315,695
 - Assessing applications for Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Fund monies (fund £660,707) (scheme closed 18/3/22 and will pay by 31/3/22)
- The Council now have to identify and pay £150 Council Tax Rebate (Energy Bills payment) going to all eligible Band A-D properties by 30 September 2022 and devise a discretionary scheme (has to be paid by 30 November 2022) for those not eligible in standard scheme (i.e., Bands E-H plus those not eligible in bands A-D). This is a massive task and it is estimated that we will have to pay approx. 37,000 households with funding of £5.546m.
- Household Support Fund –100 households have been identified via the LIFT product as being deemed to be in Financial Crisis and Fuel Poverty. Looking to spend £32,000 allocated to the service as part of the Household Support Fund.
- The LIFT campaign has seen the service bring in an additional £239,705 for the residents of Gravesham during the financial year

PI 26 - Total number of reported corporate complaints

- In Q2 the council updated its corporate complaints procedure, with the number of stages involved in the process reducing from three to two.
 - Stage One complaints are responded to by Service Managers.
 - Stage Two Complaints are responded to by the Director of the particular service to review the action taken in Stage One.
 - There is no longer a Stage Three (Chief Executive) response.
 - Stage One complaints continue to be replied to within 10 working days from the date of acknowledgement, with Stage Two responses replied to within 20 days from the date of acknowledgement.
- During Q3 there were 43 complaints compared to 79 in Q2 and 77% of complaints in the period were closed inside timescale.

The largest proportion of the complaints during this quarter were for Housing DSO Building Management and related to delays in repairs and perceived poor repairs. However; to put this into context, 19,237 jobs were completed up to the end of February 2022 and there were 42 complaints about repairs and maintenance in the same period, meaning that 0.21% of customers have complained about service delivery.

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

- Citizens Access Council Tax allows customers to view their council tax account balance, instalments due and payments made, view and download council tax bills for current and previous years and view any discounts or exemptions including Council Tax Reduction. The number of people signing up to the system continues to increase steadily.

PI 49 - % of posts involved in shared service arrangements

- This is an annual indicator, so there is nothing to report for Q3.

PI 55 - % of internal audit recommendations implemented

- This relates to the number of internal audit recommendations implemented and fluctuates dependent upon the number of recommendations that become due. The total number of recommendations was relatively low at the end of Q3 with only 44 due for implementation by the end of December, 28 of which had been implemented, giving an outturn of 63.6%.
The latest figures will be circulated outside of the meeting. The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service advised that he would circulate the latest figures outside of the meeting.
- Members can draw some assurance from the fact that the number of recommendations as a whole remains relatively low, suggesting that the internal audit process is not identifying large numbers of control issues.
- A brief update on the activity of internal audit & counter fraud as of 31 December has also been included. As of today, plan delivery now stands at 70% with a further 30% underway and at this point we are expecting to achieve 90% plan delivery against our target of 95%, which is due to circumstances beyond our control.
- In terms of counter fraud activity, we have provided a figure for the quarter and the cumulative figure for the year. The total for the year so far is now cashable savings of approx. £287,208 in the form of additional council tax, business rates, covid grants and housing benefit overpayments. We also have notional savings of £186,000 associated with the recovery of two council properties.

PI 56 - % of information requests completed within statutory deadline

- Performance in relation to FOI requests is good, with 88% responded to on time during Q3, which is the highest level since Q2 in the previous year.
- The collection rates as at the end of February 2022 (last year in brackets) are:
 - Council tax – 93.89% (last year - 93.60%)
 - NNDR – 102.20% (last year - 95.02%)
 These have been affected by a combination of:
 - The award of covid-19 additional relief fund (CARF) of £1.6m in respect of 2021/22 (significantly reducing the NNDR liability for the current year)
 - The new Berkeley Homes assessment which added £0.5m to the current year liability and £0.6m to the arrears
 - The new Asda store which added a further £0.25m to the current year and £0.5m to the arrears
 The NNDR collection rate will of course drop at the end of the year as we won't include any overpayments on accounts (mainly caused by the award of CARF)

Following questions from Members of the Committee, The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service highlighted the following:

- The Council Tax Rebate (Energy Bills payment) will be paid using the existing details the Council already has from direct debit arrangements, alternative arrangements will need to be made for all those whose details the Council doesn't currently have. For those with joint name arrangements; they will have to decide between them who will receive the payment.

- Freedom of Information requests at the end of Q3 were slightly below average in comparison to previous years. 600 to 675 per year is the average and the current trajectory suggests this year will be just over 600.
- Housing Allocation refers to people who apply to be on a housing waiting list.
- In relation to Audit recommendations, the performance figures are expressed in percentages rather than numbers, however, the contextual information is included to provided further clarity on the data.

Committee Members raised the following matters:

- Cllr Meade raised the issue of one item being on the agenda and questioned how cost effective / carbon neutral holding the meeting was when the Performance report could have been circulated by email. Cllr Meade also highlighted that several officers were not in attendance so certain questions could not be answered. The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service advised that he would feed this matter back.
- Councillor Meade, Councillor Hills and Councillor Craske highlighted that some Members are not satisfied with the IT provision provided by the Council and raised the following areas:
 - Some Members feel that they don't have adequate IT equipment and the devices issued are not fit for purpose. This matter should be fed back and reviewed.
 - A presentation to Members failed, due to technical difficulties, in the Council Chamber this week
 - A Member is currently unable to access their email account
 - Some members of the public have not been able to view their bills on the Council Tax system because of issues with the system

The Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service advised that he would feed these matters back to the Assistant Director (Corporate Services).

- Councillor Gow explained that the new telephony service for the customer contact service should come to this Committee before launching to make sure it is fit for purpose.
- Cllr Harding explained that the Council needed to be proactive in looking at the technology provision for those who want to contact the Council and are hearing impaired.
- Cllr Singh explained a resident was finding it difficult to renew their parking permit online and alternative methods of renewal are needed.

The Committee noted the Corporate Performance Report: Q3 2021-22

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.04 pm