

Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 8 June 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Narinderjit Singh Thandi (Chair)
Cllr Brian Sangha (substitute Vice-Chair)

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

Pat Knight Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits)
James Larkin Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service
Jackie Denton Customer Services Manager (Minutes)

31. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Brian Francis and Cllr Brian Sangha attended as his substitute.

32. To sign the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2022 were signed by the Chair.

33. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

34. Corporate Performance Report: Q4 2021-22

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) and 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 Four 2021-22 (January to March 2022).

The Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) highlighted the following:

PI 23 – Average processing time taken for Housing Benefit claims (days)

This is 16.4 days compared to 14.6 in Q3 and 12.4 in Q4 of the previous year. However, putting this into context the council, along with a number of other authorities, have been under considerable pressure with various grant schemes and household support funds but

we remain better than the national average of 19.0 days and Kent districts are averaging 18.0 days. At the end of May we were processing claims at 20.8 days.

PI 24 – Average processing time for changes of circumstances in Housing Benefits claims (days)

This is 4.4 days which is a drop on the previous quarter. At the end of May it was 7 days.

Council tax collection rates are 20%, 0.09 down on this time last year.

Business rates collection is 23.6% and increase of 5%.

PI 26 – Corporate Complaints

At the end of Q4 complaints had decreased to 36 which is half of what it was during the same quarter in the previous year. The complaints are evenly spread across the areas and Management Team do not feel any intervention is required at this time. There were also 80 compliments during Q4 primarily due to the helpfulness of staff.

PI 50 – Total number of people signed up to Citizens Access

At the end of Q4 this increased to 12,592 which is nearly 4,000 more households than the year before.

Following questions from Members of the Committee, the Service Manager (Revenues & Benefits) highlighted the following:

- The team are experiencing unprecedented pressure and share Members' concern. We are currently making energy payments to 37,000 households on top of the daily work. We are recruiting and have new members of staff but it takes 6-12 months to train on housing benefits. We have tried to obtain further resilience and do have one person from NEC (Northgate) supporting us but unfortunately there is no other available staff. We are not alone in this problem it is affecting authorities across the district. We are looking at our processes and how we can improve with automation on tasks such as data entry. Unfortunately benefits claims are complicated and there is the need for human intervention. There is concern at the processing time of 20.8 days which is an improvement on April when it was 23 days. On top of this we have the changes to the council tax reduction scheme and that is a totally different way of working for the team. We look forward to improved performance in Q2.
- The Service Manager to bring details to the next meeting on the impact of these delays to the individuals
- Whilst the more straightforward cases are now dealt with by DWP that leaves the more complex cases to local authorities such as pension cases, self-employment cases
- There are currently no grants for businesses but there are a number of reliefs and exemptions in place. The only additional payment is the retail discount and we still have the legacy of the Covid19 additional relief fund of £1.7m, £1.3m currently spent
- A Member raised that 53% of all complaints during the last year were related to Housing DSO but in contrast a large majority of the compliments were Housing Repairs. Improvement has been made in terms of Housing Repairs due to the reorganisation within the management structure but in contrast Members receive a number of complaints from residents advising that their Housing Officers are unavailable and will only communicate via email. It is a public service where people need to have one to one conversations with their Housing Officer when they have a problem and this needs to improve as we have lost the human touch. Some residents feel we have become a remote service.

PI 49 – % of posts in shared service arrangements

This is an annual indicator. There is a slight drop on the previous year at 5.4% and is linked to changes in Revenues & Benefits and the shared working arrangements ending and some changes within HR services.

PI 55 - % of internal audit recommendations implemented

There were 63 agreed actions due for completion by the end of Q4 and as at 31 March 2022, 44 had been implemented giving an out-turn of 69.8%. As of today, six of the 19 outstanding have since been completed.

Internal Audit update - There were a number of vacancies and some periods of sickness which had an impact on resources giving a final plan completion out-turn for 2021-22 of 90% of the agreed assurance reviews delivered against a target of 95%. To put this into context there were two reviews still at fieldwork stage as of 31 March.

Counter Fraud update - The total savings identified during 2021-22 were £473,843. The Gravesham share of costs for the whole of the internal audit & counter fraud services in 2021-22 were £198,398 with fraud resources being around £75k of that so the savings represent excellent value for money.

PI 56 - % of information requests completed within statutory deadline

This is fairly consistent with previous years with 86% responded to within the 20 day statutory deadline.

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

- Members agreed that counter fraud performance continues to be excellent as are responses to FOIs
- Revenues & Benefits shared service was different to other shared services in that it was a shared management arrangement not a full shared service. It was established that as a shared management arrangement it wasn't feasible for one person to lead two services. An annual review of the IA&CF shared services is due to be carried out and that report will come to Committee in September. There is no intention to stop shared working arrangements at this time
- Members were particularly impressed with the value for money delivered in terms of counter fraud and other activity
- To clarify what we refer to when stating that a property has been recovered, sub-letting is a criminal offence and the team investigate cases of tenancy fraud as part of our activity. The Cabinet Office has done some sums and calculated that the recovery of a council property equates to a saving of £93k based on savings in terms of temporary accommodation and other costs. We record a saving, applying the Cabinet Office figures, when a property is recovered as a result of investigation activity. We are yet to prosecute anybody as there has been insufficient evidence of sub-letting but properties have been returned due to other mis-use.

The Committee noted the Corporate Performance Report: Q4 2021-22

35. Information Governance Annual Report 2021-22

This report is intended to provide Members with an overview of the current arrangements within the council during 2021-22 to strategically manage the information that it collects and holds.

This is the second report of its type presented to the committee, the first having been produced last year.

Key highlights to note:

- Information Governance Policy Framework has been maintained during the year
- The number of Freedom of Information Requests/Environmental Information Request received during the year (604) was largely consistent with the previous year
- The number of Subject Access Requests did increase during the year from 5 to 9. Response rate was not at the level we expected to be achieved and the reasons for this have been investigated and it was identified that this was due to training needs of departmental staff involved in handling requests. Training has now been provided
- Decline in data incidents recorded during 2021 (9 compared to 14 in the previous year), all were identified as human error and training and guidance was issued to individual officers and all staff as deemed appropriate depending on the nature of the incident
- Publication Scheme (single point of reference setting out the types of information the council holds) has been reviewed and updated during the year, with the new Publication Scheme now live on the website
- Surveillance Camera Local Authority Code of Practice has been adopted

Looking forward:

- Assessment of individual surveillance camera schemes operated by the council with a view to achieving certification during 2022-23
- Maintenance of knowledge of Information Governance Team and key officers
- Review of arrangements for compliance with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) alongside maintenance of existing information governance arrangements

The Committee noted the information contained within the report and suggested that Members would benefit from training.

36. Verbal Update - £150 Energy Payment

The Service Manager, Revenues & Benefits updated Members on progress with paying residents the £150 energy payment.

As at today we have paid 20,000 households. £2.9m has been paid out of funding of £5.3m. We need to get these payments made by 20 September. These are all Direct Debit cases paid so far for Bands A-D and Band E with Disability Relief. We have written out to all our customers who have received payment so far advising that if necessary they can write to their banks to ensure that if they have an overdraft the £150 energy payment doesn't get swallowed up by the overdraft and we have received positive feedback from households on that.

We still have 1500 odd cases that we are currently working on where there has been a mismatch of names, the last payment has not been a DD payment or where we are waiting

clearance of their first DD payment if it was set up recently. It could be that they have informed us that they have vacated the property and we need to investigate where they were on the eligible date of 1 April 2022. We are working our way through these mis-matches.

We started with DD cases in accordance with government guidance as those who pay by DD we will already have their bank details and this reduces the risk of fraud. For non-DD payers (there are about 14000 of those) we have been working hard designing a new external portal so customers can securely provide us with their bank account details. We will be writing to those households during June providing them with a secure code. Once we have received their bank details they will go to a government Spotlight system to validate the bank details and we can then make the payments.

There is also a discretionary scheme and we are looking to finalise that but we need to get the other payments out first. The discretionary fund is £250k and we are investigating making payments to households who are in receipt of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme regardless of what Band they are in and we are also looking at topping up those in Bands A-D and looking at extended payments to those properties who receive a discount who are severely mentally impaired.

The mandatory scheme end date is end September and the discretionary scheme end date is end November.

Following questions from Members of the Committee, the Service Manager, Revenues & Benefits, highlighted the following:

- We are looking to get letters out to the non-DD payers by the end of June. We will give them 28 days to complete their details online. If they haven't done this we will then send a reminder and we will then see what we have left and how we can deal with particular cases
- If someone pays their council tax by credit or debit card we wouldn't pay the rebate on to their card we would require their bank details to pay into their account
- Someone can claim the £150 on the property that they are living in on the 1 April 2022 so if they moved out on the 2 April Gravesham would still be responsible for making their payment as they were in this borough on 1 April 2022.
- With regard to anyone on Bands E-H we are looking at those who are asset rich but cash poor and believe that is fair
- The one area which is out of our control is where we send details to the government portal to check bank accounts as other local authorities are using the same portal and it could cause delay

The Committee thanked the Service Manager, Revenues & Benefits for the update.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 20:25pm.