

**BUSINESS SUPPORT
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

1 JULY 2021

**ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

Report from: Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer
Jan Guyler, Interim Monitoring Office
Author: Stephen Platt, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report sets out activities and progress on work areas within the Business Management Portfolio, which fall within the remit of this Committee. This information is provided in relation to the Portfolio Holder for Business Management being held to account.

1. Budget and policy framework

1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Business Management are:

- Customer Contact;
- Democracy and Governance;
- Audit and Counter Fraud;
- Revenue and Benefits;
- Income Generation (including new Joint Ventures);
- Risk Management;
- Performance Monitoring;
- Business Management;
- Commissioning, and;
- Medway Norse

2. Customer and Business Support (Customer Contact element)

- 2.1 Customer and Business Support (CABS) was launched in October 2018 and replaces the services previously known as Business Administration Support Services (BASS) and Customer Contact. This report refers only to activities aligned to the former Customer Contact, as previously defined.
- 2.2 CABS manages initial customer contact for the authority, through a dedicated leadership team and a team of customer service professionals, allowing service specialists to focus on direct service delivery. CABS officers deal with a proportion of enquiries on a 'one and done' basis and form an essential part of the service delivery chain.
- 2.3 For the period of this report - in fact since the end of the 2019-20 financial year - the majority of officers in the CABS service were deployed to work at home, due to Covid 19 restrictions. This includes officers answering the authority's phones in what has become a virtual contact centre. These officers have continued to effectively deliver throughout the pandemic and to keep open the 'council's front door' - something very much appreciated not only by customers who could continue to access council service, where it was in place, but also valued by our internal customers. Working arrangements did not adversely impact on performance, although it should be stated that the Covid 19 crisis did have the effect of suppressing some telephony demand. The pandemic necessitated some operational changes and these are mentioned later in this report.
- 2.4 CABS telephony officers provide the first point of contact for advice and information, and for service requests, for most council services including Revenues and Benefits, Social Care, Planning, Housing Solutions, Environment, Waste, Highways, Pupil Services (School Admissions, Free School Meals and School Transport), and Medway Libraries Service. In 2020-21, CABS dealt with an average of 28,000 phone enquiries per month. The pandemic undoubtedly impacted on call volumes, with some council services closed or offering reduced facilities, and this is demonstrated by the comparison with 2019-20 demand (an average of 41,725 phone contacts per month). To place this in context, traditional phone calls are declining over time anyway, so it is not yet clear to what extent Covid suppressed demand, versus natural decline. At the time of writing, phone call volumes have risen significantly (April and May 2021) and this is being closely monitored.
- 2.5 Customer satisfaction has performed reasonably well, achieving a score of 76.2% 'satisfied' customers (from those randomly surveyed) for 2020-21, and 74.5% for the period from September 2020 to March 2021.
- 2.6 Working with ICT colleagues CABS is, at the time of writing, assimilating a new telephone system. The upgrade is long overdue; the 'IPFX' system has been in place for many years and has, at times, been unstable, affecting the team's ability to effectively and consistently serve customers. Additionally, as part of planning for the future, the CABS team is keen to explore opportunities to modernise and this includes providing multi-channel options for customers. In practice, this means CABS officers may be able to deal with enquiries

through a chat facility, social media or email, as well as through traditional telephony.

- 2.7 The CABS service is also responsible for providing face to face Housing Benefits, Council Tax and Housing Solutions help and advice from Kingsley House in Gillingham. During 2020-21 this facility assisted an average of 85 customers by appointment each month. Again, due to the influence of the pandemic, numbers were reduced when compared to 2019-20 which saw an average of 1,350 customers per month. In response to the Covid 19 emergency, the operational model for Kingsley House was adapted in line with new health and safety guidelines, but without depriving service access for customers, some of whom were classed as vulnerable. Many officers were deployed to work at home, to continue to provide telephone access to services, but the Kingsley House facility was also sustained for those customers in need of face-to-face support. The traditional drop-in service was suspended and a strict appointment only arrangement established, supported by new safer access control measures. A greater proportion of customers were served through other channels, including online and by telephone. In all respects, this has worked extremely well.
- 2.8 The CABS ethos continues to be one of continuous process improvement and transformation, support for the digital agenda and failure demand reduction. For example, through call analysis it was identified that the bulky waste booking form was causing customer frustration and additional work. By collaborating with Digital and IT the root cause of that failure demand was eliminated. Working closely with Business Change colleagues, the aim is to help develop and promote online forms and information – such as applying for a Medway Youth Pass - offering customers a convenient alternative to the traditional phone call. Mindful that some residents may not have access to digital media, CABS offers a range of 'digital assist' services, supporting customers with blue badge and bus pass applications, council tax form completion and access to other services, for example, where they are unable to use online forms. When the Test and Trace Isolation Payment Scheme went live in October 2020, the CABS service was on hand to help those who could not complete the form themselves. CABS played a significant part in handling enquiries relating to the distribution of Covid-related government funded financial support.
- 2.9 The CABS portfolio includes the Community Interpreting service (CIS), which manages interpreting and translation provision in over 60 languages for the council and customers. This has been part of Medway Council since it was formed in 1998, providing consistently high standard interpreting and translation services to the public sector and legal profession. CIS has a wide client base including NHS Medway, Swale, Dartford, Gravesham, Swanley and West Kent Clinical Commissioning Groups, NHS Commissioning Board, Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust, and other local authorities, mental health services, schools, solicitors and voluntary organisations. In 2020-21, CIS processed an average of 358 requests per month utilising a pool of c.140 interpreters and translators. The pandemic reduced the number of face-to-face service requests, but the team was able to increase the number of interpreting appointments completed by telephone (and this will very much

be a focus for 2021-22). Telephone and video link services ensure that customers are able to continue to access interpreters, despite the constraints of the pandemic, or when considering mobility and travel costs. Research into remote interpreting methods continues as a developing future opportunity for the council, as part of the transformation programme.

- 2.10 The CABS service, under the 'Macmillan Welfare Benefits' banner, provides welfare benefits advice, information and support for all Medway residents, their families and carers, who are living with or beyond cancer. The service includes support to patients seen at the Kent Oncology Centre in Maidstone Hospital regardless of their place of residence. Although face to face appointments were suspended due Covid 19 restraints, clients are still being effectively supported by telephone and email. In 2020-21 the service secured an actual and assumed annual benefit gain of approximately £3.3m for our clients. This is less than the £4m gain secured in 2019-20 due to changes in benefit thresholds and the impact of Covid 19 on the NHS. Nationally the Macmillan organisation continually refers to a welfare benefits review that will shape future service provision, but, for many years, there has been no update to this, and funding continues to be renewed in short terms. In a recent announcement, funding by the Charity has been further extended until 31 December 2022.
- 2.11 Although traditional telephony traffic is slowly declining over time, the impact of the pandemic has masked the trend with artificially low demand. Performance throughout the pandemic has been very good, but high demand is returning, and this will place the team's reduced resources at full capacity. A number of techniques are used to continue to transform the service, including considered staff deployment, dual-skilling of a proportion of officers, and continuous attention to improving processes. CABS is a service committed to delivering the best possible service with the available resources, whilst collaborating with Business Change colleagues to continue to drive modernisation. Customers continue to be provided with ever-growing opportunities to benefit from online facilities where appropriate and CABS remains committed to providing assisted digital support to customers who need help. In line with the rest of the authority, home-based working is likely to continue to feature in some form in future. CABS officers have commented, consistent with the wider council staff survey, that homeworking is popular, particularly as part of a hybrid working arrangement. In CABS this can be successfully achieved, in the context of reduced building occupancy which will be determined by a wider council policy.

3. Democracy and Governance

3.1 Electoral Services

a) Election of Police & Crime Commissioner for Kent 6 May 2021

- 3.1.1 The planning and conduct of these elections went relatively smoothly although the added challenges of trying to recruit sufficient numbers of staff, book and liaise with polling station venues and identify and purchase PPE kit cannot be

underestimated. The count took place over two daytime sessions, at the Direction of the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO). On Friday 7 May the verification took place and on Monday 11 May, the counting of votes was undertaken.

3.1.2 The measures put into place at the polling stations, opening of postal votes venue and the count, to minimise the transmission of Covid were welcomed by staff, voters and visitors and helped create confidence in the arrangements that had been put in place.

3.1.3 Turnout increased by about 1 percent compared to the PCC elections in 2016, broken down as follows:

	2021	2016
Overall turnout	19.30%	18.29%
Turnout at polling stations	12.08%	11.86%
Turnout of postal voters	51.88%	48.22%

3.1.4 A claim to the Cabinet Office to cover the costs of the election will be submitted by the 6-month deadline in November 2021.

3.1.5 The Electoral Commission will publish a report of their review of the elections later this year.

b) Electoral registration

3.1.6 Members may recall that in recognition that the previous annual canvass arrangements were costly and in some cases an inefficient use of resources, the Cabinet Office introduced a reformed canvass last year.

3.1.7 Instead of sending a blanket paper form to each of the 116,000 properties in Medway to ascertain who lives at the property and to check they are eligible to be included in the register of electors and then following up if there is no response, the new process involved:

- A mandatory national data match against DWP data.
- The option for EROs to undertake local data matching.
- Properties being allocated to a Route depending on the outcome of the data matching:
 - Route 1 – properties where all electors have matched against one set of data.
 - Route 2 – properties where one or more electors have not matched, or where there have been recent changes in householder or other indications that there has been a change in electors.
 - Route 3 – properties such as care homes or student accommodation.

3.1.8 The reformed canvass means that:

- Route 1 properties are sent a letter/form outlining who is currently registered to vote at the address. Householders only have to respond to this if the information is not correct.
- Route 2 properties go through a modified canvass process involving the despatch of a paper form, door knocking and e-communications.
- Route 3 properties can be canvassed in any way the ERO deems suitable but if no response is received, they must be canvassed like route 2 properties.

3.1.9 In terms of implementing these changes in Medway last year, this meant that about 75% of properties in Medway were canvassed as Route 1, so that we were able to concentrate more resources on the remaining 25% of properties which will almost inevitably be more challenging to engage with. Residents in Route 1 properties who needed to notify us of changes were encouraged to do so via text message (SMS), a 24/7 automated telephone line or a secure web page online. This significantly reduced the volume of paper forms the team had to process. Of the 75,700 Route 1 properties contacted only 10% responded to indicate that changes to their existing registration are required seeming to indicate that the existing registration information and positive matching against the DWP database were correct.

3.1.10 Twenty canvassers were recruited to visit the 31,000 properties in Route 2 and to make this part of the process even more efficient and cost effective, and in light of the COVID 19 restrictions that were in place last year, they used tablet devices to update registration information which were also used to enable new electors to register to vote during the same visit. Paper forms were sent as well as required by the new legislation. Householders were able to notify us of changes via the other remote methods listed above and were encouraged to do so rather than completing and sending back the paper form.

3.1.11 Priority was given to undertaking a personal canvass in those in Route 2 areas where there are higher numbers of non-matched electors and traditionally lower rates of responses to the canvass – Chatham Central, Gillingham North, Gillingham South, Luton & Wayfield, River and Rochester West wards. Canvassers were originally given longer to visit properties in these areas and the plan was that all properties in Route 2 would also be visited. The personal canvass was curtailed approximately 2 weeks before the original end date due to the imposition of the lockdown in November 2020.

3.1.12 Unfortunately, because the Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission insisted that the suppliers of electoral registration software prioritised providing statistics for their use, it has not been possible to do a thorough analysis of the response rates by Route or method of response.

3.1.13 Whilst there were inevitably some teething issues with the tablet devices, feedback from the canvassers who used them was extremely positive, citing they were relieved of having to carry heavy forms around, allowed them to plan and undertake their visits in a much smarter and efficient way, as well as

enabling them to register people to vote without having to make a second visit.

3.1.14 Planning has just started for this years' canvass under the revised arrangements and the national data match will be undertaken later in June. This will provide the basic information required to finalise the arrangements such as the number of canvassers required to undertake visits to Route 2 properties, for example. It is intended to recruit more canvassers this year all using tablets.

c) Ward Boundary Review

3.1.15 Members will be aware that the final recommendations were published on 1 December 2020 and that all new arrangements will come into effect for the Local and Parish elections scheduled for May 2023.

d) Review of polling districts, polling places and polling stations

3.1.16 It is necessary to undertake a full review of polling districts and polling places now that the final recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England have been published. The existing Informal Working Party of members will be convened in the next few weeks and months, and officers have already started to look at the possible principles and methods to be used, including using the Geographical Information System (GIS). It is expected that this will take up to a year, with the final recommendations of the Informal Working Party being reported to Full Council in July 2022.

e) Parish Community Governance Review

3.1.17 The conclusion of the Ward Boundary review also leads to a need to review the electoral arrangements in the Parish area of Medway. The Local Government and Public Health Involvement in Health Act 2007 requires the Council to undertake this exercise by way of a Community Governance Review. Officers are intending to submit a report to Full Council on 22 July 2021 seeking approval to the establishment of a member-officer working party to oversee the Review which will report back its' recommendations in July 2022. Without prejudicing the outcome of the Review, it is likely that at the very least the numbers of Parish Councillors should be reviewed to reflect expected increases in electorates in particular.

f) Parliamentary constituency boundary review

3.1.18 The Boundary Commission have recently published their initial proposals for the review of Parliamentary Constituencies. Members are reminded that it is being conducted based on the Parliamentary electorate figures as they were on 2 March 2020 and existing Ward boundaries, not those that come into effect in 2023.

3.2 Member and Mayoral Services

- 3.2.1 Officers are continuing to contribute to the development and delivery of the ongoing member development programme in conjunction with the Member Development Advisory Group. The majority of the sessions have been briefings on subjects that either officers thought should be brought to Members' attention, or at the request of Overview & Scrutiny Committees. Or crucially, as part of the Children's Services Improvement Plan. Between November 2020 and the end of May 2021, 9 sessions have been held, all remotely, and a further 6 scheduled until the end of October 2021. Generally, attendance at the remote sessions has been higher than was being attained when they were being held in person and, subject to the view of Members, it is likely that sessions would be delivered remotely and in person once Covid restrictions are lifted. The Member Development Advisory Group have reviewed the ongoing programme and prioritised sessions to be held once Covid restrictions are lifted.
- 3.2.2 The team are continuing to maintain, develop and update the Members Portal as the first port of call for information about the Council and other resources Members need to enable them to carry out their roles. As well as making the presentations from Member Briefings available, recent updates include information about the Census 2021, the Ward Boundary Review and links to some useful information from the LGA about Civility in Public Life and suggested "rules for engagement" for Members using social media.
- 3.2.3 The Covid pandemic and restrictions have meant the cancellation of all civic and Mayoral engagements including the Dedication Service, Remembrance Service at Rochester Cathedral and the French POW Memorial Service.
- 3.2.4 Similarly, any planned events to raise money for the Mayor's Charity during the Covid restrictions were cancelled although a charity opera evening involving a remote, livestreamed performance was held at the end of October 2020.
- 3.2.5 In the period October 2020 to the end of May 2021, the number of engagements attended by the Mayor and Deputy has obviously been severely restricted, but they have attended a total of 42, including participating in several events being Livestreamed.

3.3 Democratic Services

- 3.3.1 The Democratic Services Team supports a wide range of meetings including full Council, Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Task Groups set up to conduct in-depth scrutiny reviews, other Committees established by the Council including the Audit Committee, Planning Committee, Licensing and Safety Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board, School Admission Appeals and Exclusion Reviews.

3.3.2 The team also leads on the management of public engagement in formal meetings, maintenance of, and revisions to, the Council's Constitution, administration of representation on outside bodies and the Council's electronic Committee Management System (modern.gov).

3.3.3 Since the last report to Committee (October 2020), the following achievements are highlighted, in addition to dealing with day-to-day operational priorities:

- Ongoing work with ICT colleagues and our AV Contractor to support remote attendance by Councillors and others at meetings and livestreaming of meetings in response to the restrictions on gatherings and new legislation for local authority meetings as a consequence of the COVID pandemic up until 6 May 2021. Development of an e-voting system for use at remote meetings had reaching testing stage with a small number of Members by the beginning of March, however, the Government's announcement in late March that remote meetings would cease after 6 May 2021 meant that that there was little point in continuing this work at this stage. Should the Government pass legislation in the future allowing for remote meetings, then this work could be revisited if Members wish to do so.
- The team has worked with colleagues in Public Health, Legal and Health and Safety to ensure that the return to in person meetings have been held safely, in compliance with Government guidance with regards to the pandemic. A number of steps have been taken including the use of the St. George's Centre, which provides plenty of capacity, to hold a wide range of formal meetings and the continuation of livestreaming meetings, the aim of which has been to minimise the attendance of the press and public (although this is expressly provided for in law and access for press and public, in person, has been provided for at meetings).
- Continued support for Councillors who are keen to have electronic access to papers for meetings. Around 50% of Councillors remain fully or partially paperless.
- Support was provided for the cross-party Monuments and Place Names Working Group which was set up by Council in the wake of the Black Lives Matters demonstrations across the country last year. The outcome of the Working Group's deliberations was reported to Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee (November 2020) and the Cabinet (December 2020).
- Following some cross-party discussions on the working arrangements for Overview and Scrutiny Committees with a view to making the best use of time at meetings, the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee is trialling in the current municipal year, the use of some of

its meetings to limit business, as far as possible, to holding Portfolio Holders to account.

- Increased Member level activity within the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee has continued in order to strengthen the impact of scrutiny of children's services in response to findings and recommendations from the Commissioner for Children's Services in Medway. Members have received detailed dashboard data relating to children's services on a monthly basis and regular performance monitoring data workshops continue to be held to enable Members to build their capacity to provide challenge and understand the data relating to children's services in depth. These are attended by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members, along with the Director of People, relevant Assistant Directors and Service Managers and the Independent Scrutineer of the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership who is also the Independent Chair of Medway's Improvement Board. When COVID related restrictions are lifted, there will be opportunities for scrutiny Members to have regular direct contact and engagement with young people, staff and social work practitioners. There has also been an extensive programme of Member briefing sessions on various aspects of children's social care, with 8 sessions held since August 2020 and the programme is ongoing.
- The Committee also set up a task group which carried out an in-depth review into Early Help in the latter part of 2020, which focussed on parenting support in Medway. It heard from best practice local authorities, partner organisations and service users and formulated 12 recommendations which the Cabinet welcomed and approved at its meeting in February 2021. These recommendations have been built into the Parenting Support Strategy which has since been drafted and is due to be considered by the Cabinet in July 2021.

4. Audit and Counter Fraud

- 4.1 The Audit and Counter Fraud (A&CF) Shared Service has been in operation since 1 March 2016, providing internal audit, counter fraud and investigation services to Medway Council and Gravesham Borough Council. The team operates under a Charter that sets out its purpose, authority and responsibilities to deliver audit work, including rights of access. The team also maintains a Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan (QAIP) that is used to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall Service and identify areas for improvement. Both of these documents are reviewed annually, and the most recent review of the Charter was taken to Audit Committee for approval in January 2021, with the QAIP being approved in March 2021.
- 4.2 When the Council initiated its emergency plans as a consequence of the Covid pandemic and moved to the 'Response phase' in March 2020, the A&CF Service was identified as 'non-critical'; meaning that normal day to day

business was ceased with immediate effect and with staff redeployed to other more essential areas of work. When the service moved into recovery, resources for quarter one of 2020-21 were dedicated to the completion of work from 2019-20, that was suspended with the shutdown of the service.

- 4.3 As a consequence, a revised work plan for 2020-21, covering the period 01 July 2020 to 31 March 2021, was approved by the Audit Committee at their July meeting. The revised plan took account of the loss of resources for quarter one but also the changes in the risks faced by the council, with the monitoring of emergency decisions used to identify potential changes in the control environment, to ensure that reviews were focused on the main areas of risk.
- 4.4 There have been further revisions to the plan in year, to take account of further lost resource connected to the redeployment of staff to assist with the validation and assessment of claims for alternative restrictions grants. This frontline assurance work has however contributed to the overall opinion on internal control.
- 4.5 The latest annual report for the A&CF Shared Service was presented to Audit Committee in June 2021, with final performance against key targets for 2020-21 as follows:
- 82% of the agreed assurance work delivered (target 95%);
 - 100% of recommendations agreed by client management (target 90%);
 - 83% of available resources spent on productive work (target 90%); and
 - £78,608 of historic Council tax identified (resulting in additional £39,911pa in future years), £79,641 in Housing Benefit overpayments, £46,889 overpaid to a Care Home, and notional savings of £4,000 linked to one applicant being removed from the housing register, all resulting from investigative activity.
- 4.6 The team's admin officer retired at the end of April 2021, and this is the only staff turnover in the last 12 months. Some minor changes to the structure of the service have taken place and an additional Intelligence Analyst has been recruited in place of the assistant.
- 4.7 Update reports are presented to the Audit Committee four times each year, the first of which will be presented to the Audit Committee in September 2021.
- 4.8 In November/December the team will begin the planning process to prepare the work plan for 2022-23.
5. Revenue and Benefits
- 5.1 The council entered a shared management arrangement for the Revenues and Benefits service with Gravesham Borough Council on 1 October 2019.

- 5.2 The service has continued to be at the forefront in providing support to individuals and businesses (see paragraphs 5.4; 5.8 and paragraph 9 Business management – Support for Business) in line with the Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has seen unprecedented levels of demand on the service. This has been managed by the use of resilience services; automation of processes such as notification of Universal Credit changes and implementation of digital applications re: COVID-19 grants.
- 5.3 The Revenues & Benefits section continues to embrace the transformation agenda in response to a constantly changing environment which is highly legislated. As previously reported the service migrated over six million documents in six weeks to the new system in an innovative way utilising '(Ro)bots'. This project is seen as best practice culminating in it being named as Digital Project of the Year (Automation) at the NDL Community Awards in November 2020.
- 5.4 Despite the impact of Covid-19 the service continues to review working practices to improve both customer service and performance. Several transformation and digital projects have/are being progressed by officers together with colleagues in the Transformation team. This includes :-
- a landlord portal which went live in September 2020 enabling landlords to check benefit claims of tenants and thereby remove the necessity of sending paper remittances.
 - automated loading of benefit claims in respect of the majority of Universal Credit notifications of change in circumstances ensuring an improved turnaround time for residents.
 - a new online process to ensure that business grant applications to ensure payments were made promptly (after required payment assurance checks) in respect of multiple schemes (paragraph 9 Business management – Support for Business).
 - Online Test and Trace Isolation Grant payments were made promptly to residents.

a) Council Tax

- 5.5 Collection of the 2020/21 council tax was 94.0% as of 31 March 2021. Whilst this was down 0.9% compared to the previous year. However, this remains a good performance when compared to the national average which saw a 2% reduction in collection.
- 5.6 The council was awarded £2,056,371 as its share of a national hardship fund introduced by the Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance directed billing authorities to provide all recipients of working age Council Tax Reduction Scheme during the financial year 2020-21 with a further reduction in their annual council tax bill of up to £150. As of 31 March 2021, £1,815,058 of the fund had automatically been applied against 10,569 claimant's council tax accounts. The balance of the fund will be spent in accordance with existing council tax discretionary hardship policies.

b) Business Rates

5.7 Collection of the 2020/21 business rates stood at 94.0% as of 31 March 2021. Whilst this was down 2.7% compared to the previous year. It remains a good performance when compared to the national average which saw a 8% reduction in collection.

5.8 The Government responded to the COVID -19 pandemic by agreeing a wide range of financial measures to support businesses. The service has been responsible for assessing all mandatory business grants together with implementing new and subsequently revised extended retail discount and nursery discount schemes. As detailed under (paragraph 9 Business management – Support for Business)

c) Benefits

5.9 The number of days taken to process claims (combined i.e., Housing Benefit and Council Tax reduction scheme) as of 31 March 2021 averaged 11.08 days. This is an improvement of a 0.25 days when compared on the previous year despite the service having to adapt existing processes and adopt new processes

5.10 One of the new national measures is the Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Indicator or basically paying the right amount of Housing benefit, at the right time, to the right person. The latest published figures shows that the service is in the top-performing quartile thereby demonstrating a strong performance for its customers whilst reducing the financial impact for the authority (as any overpayment of Housing Benefit results in a lower payment of subsidy).

5.11 From 28 September 2020, persons receiving a positive Covid-19 test result or who have been told by the NHS to self-isolate because of close contact with someone who has Covid-19 are able to apply to receive a £500 lump sum payment, intended to address any financial hardship that may be associated with the need to self-isolate. This was later extended from 8 March 2021 to include a parent or guardian who is staying off work to look after a child who is self-isolating. Local authorities were required to administer NHS Test and Trace Support Payments to those on means tested benefits, as well as discretionary payments to others who may be experiencing financial hardship due to being unable to work. At the end of May 2021, 1,696 payments totalling £848,000 had been made.

5.12 The Benefit team has worked collaboratively:

- With the local Job Centre Plus Chatham office part of Department for Work and Pensions and maintained a strong working partnership with regards to Universal Credit and other benefit matters.
- With the Leaving Care team and devised a scheme to support and assist care leavers with their ongoing council tax liabilities; and

- With the Partnership Commissioning team assisting in the launch and operations of the Emergency Assistance Grant (including free School Meals)
- Advising and working with colleagues on the Winter Grant Scheme

6. Income Generation

- 6.1 The impact of ongoing restrictions introduced by the government to manage the Covid-19 pandemic has meant leisure and cultural facilities have remained largely closed or have been used to support outbreak control activities and parking usage continues to be low. The pandemic has also caused significant shifts in behaviour that have impacted other income streams, most notably reductions in pay and display parking income as fewer people travelled to work or to our town centres. While our services have since reopened to the public, a return to pre-Covid usage levels has not been possible due to ongoing social distancing requirements and may never occur as people's behaviours may have permanently shifted and these impacts are expected to be experienced well into 2021/22 and beyond.
- 6.2 During 2020/21 the government introduced a new sales, fees and charges income compensation scheme, with authorities able to claim for losses (net of any savings made in service delivery). The scheme does not mitigate the full impact, as it assumes local authorities will absorb the first 5% of any income shortfall, before paying 75pence of every £1 lost thereafter. The Council has submitted claims in respect of 2020/21 income losses through this scheme totalling £7.033million. In the Local Government Finance Settlement, the government confirmed the continuation of the scheme for the first quarter of the new financial year, and the budget for 2021/22 therefore assumed that scheme will continue to operate until pressures caused by Covid-19 are significantly reduced, and services can therefore resume income generating operations. As such, the proposed budget assumes income pressures in Regeneration, Culture and Environment and Business Support totalling £9.657million will be partially mitigated by income received through the scheme of £6.309million.

Corporate Debt

- 6.3 During 2019 / 20 the Corporate Debt team (CDT) which is part of the Revenues and Benefits service was initially funded for one year until the concept had been proven. Consequently, due to the success of particular initiatives detailed within this section it led to a decision to make the team permanent from 1 April 2020. This saw the Corporate Debt Manager taking responsibility for the existing council tax and business rate recovery team, and to support the Sundry Debt work.
- 6.4 The COVID-19 pandemic saw recovery action paused during lockdowns in respect of all debt categories, following the first period a recovery roadmap supporting reconnection with debtors was introduced from August 2020. A further 20,000 Covid soft nudge letters were issued to encourage re-

engagement and having targeted financially vulnerable debtors it then enabled the reintroduction of 'Covid' worded reminders and final notices. Over 11,000 repayment arrangements were consequently made.

- 6.5 An online webform to triage council tax court hearing disputes and offer contactless appointments in preparation for future liability order courts (of up to 5000 accounts per court) has been designed and was successfully trialled for the first court hearing held on 16 April 2021. Liability Order courts resume from July 2021.
- 6.6 Sundry debt has seen the successful implementation of e-forms which are being used corporately. Debtor information is being captured to enable electronic communication where possible and e-invoices over £10,000 are overseen by the Corporate Debt Manager to head off disputes and to review the quality of narrative and evidence on invoices prior to their issue. The different categories of debt have been separated further into additional debt cycles to manage partner debts independently from other distinct types (e.g., general commercial, non-commercial debtors and schools). This has enabled provisions to be agreed for aged 'bad debt' per category and will further assist with performance reporting. Reminders have been designed and are being introduced targeting different categories and electronic statements.
- 6.7 The Corporate Performance and Business Intelligence, Corporate Debt and Finance Systems teams are working together to design dashboard to enable a central view of income and debt for use by Finance Business Partners and Service Managers at quarterly monitoring meetings, to promote insight, ownership and to encourage control over income generation processes.
- 6.8 Income generated via Housing Benefit Overpayments was impacted significantly in 2020 / 21 due to the pandemic. It reduced by approximately £500k, compared to the previous financial year following the frequent pauses in recovery. Universal Credit has seen less Housing Benefit overpayments being created in 2020 / 21 (£2m), compared to 2019 / 20 (£3.5m). Overall housing benefit debt due on invoices has reduced by £800,000 compared to the same period in 2019 / 20. Furthermore, third party deductions i.e., direct deductions made from Department for Work and Pension (DWP) benefits have increased from £1.1m (March 2020) to £1.7m (March 2021), evidencing growth in DWP – third party benefit deductions.

7. Risk Management

- 7.1 Risk management is an integral part of good governance. It is a process which aims to help the Council understand, evaluate and take action on all its risks. It supports effective decision making, identification of priorities and objectives and increases the probability of success by making the most of opportunities and reducing the likelihood of failure. This enables the effective use of resources, helps secure the assets of the organisation and continued financial and organisational well-being. The Council recognises that it has a

responsibility to identify and manage the barriers to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community.

- 7.2 The Council's Risk Management Strategy:
- promotes a common understanding of risk;
 - outlines roles and responsibilities across the Council; and
 - proposes a methodology that identifies and manages risk in accordance with best practice thereby seeking to prevent injury, damage and loss.
- 7.3 The Risk Management Strategy sets out an objective method for analysing risks taking into consideration the likelihood of the risk occurring and the impact should the risk manifest. The Strategy also states the Council's agreed tolerance level for risks. The Strategy is reviewed annually to ensure that it remains up to date and continues to reflect the Council's approach to risk management. The Strategy is reviewed by the Strategic Risk Management Group, Corporate Management Team, Audit Committee, Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. The last review was considered by the Audit Committee on 05 January 2021 and Cabinet on 02 February 2021.
- 7.4 In response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Council implemented Emergency Planning procedures. A risk assessment in line with the Council's Risk Management Strategy formed the basis of all decision making and governance arrangements throughout the Response phase. Each Response and Recovery Cell Lead has been responsible for maintaining a risk register detailing the impacts of Covid-19 on their area of responsibility, following the Council's Risk Management Strategy. Cell leads have been responsible for managing risks scored below CII – significant likelihood, crucial impact (as such risks would routinely be managed on service/ operational risk registers) while issues arising from risks scored at CII or above have been escalated to the Silver Tactical and Gold Strategic Commands (as such risks would routinely be managed through the Council's Strategic Risk Register). In addition, financial thresholds have been agreed to ensure that where a decision being made would commit the Council to new expenditure or result in the loss of income, appropriate financial authorisation is in place.
- 7.5 Governance group within the Cell structure has been responsible for providing assurance on the effectiveness of risk management and the implications of actions taken through the Covid-19 response. While the Council's Corporate Risk Register Remains reflective of the key risks facing the organisation in the wider context, formal arrangements to monitor the Strategic Risk Register were paused during the initial response to enable staff to focus on managing risks in the Covid-19 Response. They recommenced from Q1 of 2020/21 with a fundamental review of the Strategic Risk Register undertaken considering the Covid-19 Response and Recovery. The latest version of the Strategic Risk Register reflecting that review was presented to the Cabinet on 04 May 2021.
- 7.6 The Governance cell is also working to ensure the impacts of decisions made have been considered appropriately to ensure all decisions taken are sound

and are in line with the Council's governance mechanisms. The Cell aims to ensure decisions:

- are made in accordance with appropriate Member and Officer decision making powers, according to the law and in line with the Council's constitution,
- comply with relevant legislation and regulations,
- are made within the Council's financial rules and are within the approved budget,
- do not significantly weaken the Council's control environment or pose a significant fraud risk, and
- do not create adverse impacts for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act.

7.7 The Governance cell continued its role into the second Recovery phase, working alongside the rest of the command-and-control structure to ensure that risks are effectively managed and that the impacts of decisions made through recovery are appropriately considered.

7.8 There is a focus on the two sets of risks faced as the Prime Minister's roadmap enables the easing of lockdown. The first area of focus is the recovery of Medway as a whole, which is being led by the Assistant Director for Culture and Community. The second area of focus is the re-opening of Council services, which is being managed through the Silver Command process, with the establishment of Bronze Cells to deliver specific elements such as the re-opening of High Streets. The Council's broader Recovery planning for the community is focussed on five key Cells; Economy, Infrastructure, Health and Social Care, Children's Services and the Voluntary and Community Sector and impact assessments are currently underway for each. These impact assessments underpin the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Capital Strategy, which in turn underpin the Council's budget for 2021/22 and beyond.

8. Performance Monitoring

8.1 The [Council Plan 2016/21](#) was agreed at Full Council in February 2016. It sets out the Council's three priorities and three ways of working which aim to deliver these priorities. It includes the measures that have been identified as supporting the delivery of the Council's priorities. These key measures of success are refreshed annually. For 2020/21 Council agreed 46 measures of success.

8.2 Monitoring of Council Plan Performance continues to take place on a quarterly basis, through Cabinet and Scrutiny, evidencing the Council's commitment to be accountable. Monitoring focusses on the key measures of success and the key programmes which have been identified as supporting the delivery of the Council's priorities.

8.3 2020/21 was a successful year for Medway Council in terms of achieving excellent outcomes across all three Council Plan priorities. We have

continued to provide high quality services that are appreciated and valued by our residents despite the constrained financial environment we are operating within and despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have achieved this by working with our partners, increasing the range of services which customers can access digitally, and by giving value for money when delivering all services. Some of our key achievements in 2020/21 set out against our three priorities are shown in Appendix 1: 2020/21 achievements.

8.4 At the end of 2021, the Corporate Performance team merged with Corporate Business Intelligence, supporting informed decision making and a further step towards being data driven.

8.5 For 2021/22, Ways of Working have been replaced by the following Council Values:

- Financial Resilience
- Digital Enablement
- Working together to empower communities
- Creativity and Innovation
- Tackle Climate Change
- Child Friendly

9. Business Management – Support for Business

9.1 During the first national lockdown in the Spring of 2020, the government announced a range of financial support for businesses impacted by the restrictions introduced to reduce the spread of Covid-19. The following initial schemes were implemented by Medway Council in in the Spring of 2020:

- Expanded Business Rates Relief of 100% for retail, hospitality and leisure sites, through which we awarded £34.129million to 1,300 businesses.
- Mandatory grants for small businesses through which we awarded £22.020million to 2,020 businesses.
- Mandatory grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses through which we awarded £14.095million to 727 businesses.
- Discretionary grants for small businesses through which we awarded £1.848million to 319 businesses.

9.2 In response to the second period of national restrictions in November 2020, the government introduced further support for businesses with grants delivered through the mandatory Local Restrictions Support Grant schemes (LRSG) and the discretionary Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG). Eligibility for the LRSG schemes is based on business rate liability with payments based on rateable value of the business premises, while the ARG scheme is much less prescriptive and could therefore be made available to businesses without a rateable business property.

9.3 To the end of May 2021, the following support has been delivered through the mandatory schemes:

- LRSG (Closed) Addendum – this scheme provided grants to businesses who were forced to close due to restrictions in force between 5 November and 2 December 2020. The Council distributed a total of £2.129million between 1,277 businesses through this scheme.
- LRSG (Closed) Post 2 December 2020 – this scheme provided grants to businesses who were required to close due to restrictions in place after 2 December. The Council distributed a total of £444,303 between 385 businesses through this scheme.
- LRSG (Closed) Addendum Tier 4 – this scheme provided grants to businesses who were forced to close due to the restrictions in place under Tier 4 from 19 December 2020 onwards. The Council distributed a total of £1.216million between 1,278 businesses through this scheme.
- LRSG (Closed) Addendum Post 5 January 2021 – this scheme provides grants to businesses who were forced to close during the restrictions in place from 5 January 2021 to 31 March 2021. The Council has to date distributed a total of £3.213million between 1,286 businesses through this scheme which closes on 30 June 2021.
- Closed Business Lockdown Payment – the Council distributed a total of £6.397million between 1,281 businesses through this scheme.
- LRSG (Sectors) – this scheme provides grants to businesses in sectors that have been forced to close since restrictions were initially implemented in Spring 2020. The Council paid £3,875 to two businesses identified as eligible in Medway.
- Christmas Support Payment for wet-led pubs – the Council distributed a total of £69,000 between 69 businesses through this scheme.

9.4 Since the data to determine availability for these schemes is not held by central government, the grant allocations provided to local authorities were based on estimates and in many cases, the grant received was in excess of the amount payable to eligible businesses in Medway. The grant conditions for these schemes include a reconciliation process during the 2021/22 financial year, through which any excess funding will be repayable to the government and any underfunding payable to local authorities. Once this reconciliation is complete the Council is expecting to return c£11.979million of excess funding to the government.

9.5 The ARG grant funding received in 2020/21 totalling £8.046million was to fund support for businesses through to the end of the 2021/22 financial year, with the scheme in operation having been amended to reflect revisions made to the guidance from the Government over time. To date a total of £1,849,492 has been distributed to 379 businesses, with the balance of the grant not distributed in 2020/21 rolled forward and available to support businesses throughout 2021/22. Proposals to use an element of this grant to deliver wider business support activities, in line with the grant conditions, are in development for 2021/22.

9.6 The Restart Grant Scheme was launched in March 2021 to provide a one-off grant to businesses in the non-essential retail, hospitality, leisure, personal care and accommodation sectors, to support them to reopen safely as Covid-

19 restrictions are lifted. To date the Council has distributed a total of £8.511million to 1,162 businesses through this scheme.

10. Medway Norse

10.1 Key achievements are as follows:

- Reactive maintenance has continued throughout the pandemic to ensure the safety of staff and the public and to improve the working environment. Planned maintenance works this quarter has included several fire alarms upgrades, the Brook car park stairwell refurbishment, Parklands disabled children residential new roof, and Lordswood Library new roof.
- With the Council standing down its tactical response to the pandemic and the focus now turning to recovery in earnest, we continue to work with Medway Norse colleagues on the safe reopening of our operational buildings. It should also be acknowledged that we have now shifted to a more agile working arrangement, with office-based staff still largely working from home.
- The Tree Team completed planting of 200 street and park trees this winter, which is the highest this service has ever planted. They were also fundamental in enabling the planting of 13,000 trees via the Urban Tree Challenge Fund, stepping in at the last moment when Covid restrictions would not allow volunteers to undertake this role.
- Since the implementation of the new contracts in September 2019, the provision delivered by Norse has continued to improve and is operating to a good standard, highlighted by the continuous reduction in the number of incidents, customer queries and complaints numbers across a high number of routes. Any safeguarding concerns raised are resolved quickly.
- Schools have a good working relationship with Medway Norse and communication with both schools and Council officers is at a high level, which has been highlighted during the Covid-19 crisis, where transport has continued to be provided as necessary in challenging circumstances.
- Medway Norse reacted to the Covid-19 situation positively during the lockdown period and this continued into the full return of pupils in September 2020 and the again in March 2021 through to the current

period, with all pupils requiring transport on Norse routes being appropriately transported to and from school.

- Changes made to the Hoath Way and Capstone booking system were made in 2021. Times slots were changed to hourly in line with Cuxton to better manage queuing. A small increase to slot numbers was also made.
- Work has also commenced on a review of the booking system post pandemic restrictions being lifted. An update for this will be provided during the next reporting cycle.
- Medway Norse has continued to provide an exceptional collection service during lockdown 2, considering it has had increased pressure with drivers and staff (loaders) having to self-isolate due to track and trace. The severe weather in February impacted collections, street cleansing and bulky collections for 7 days (normal service resumed the following week). Street cleansing was suspended for the week and Medway Norse staff were redeployed to assist with gritting high profile pedestrian areas.
- There is a monthly contracts meetings between Medway Norse and Waste Services to review performance, good practice, issues and improvement opportunities. The waste contract remains one of the most complimented services operated by Medway Council. In March 21, the Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the first year of the Medway Norse Waste Contract (October 2019 - September 2020).
- Medway Norse completed an intensive programme of night cleanses for high-speed roads in March 2021 including Ash Tree and Pear Tree Lane and the slip roads off A289.

Lead officer contacts:

Phil Watts, Chief Finance Officer phil.watts@medway.gov.uk Tel 01634 331196

Jan Guyler, Interim Monitoring Officer jan.guyler@medway.gov.uk Tel 01634 332158

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Performance Monitoring 2020/21 achievements

Background documents

None