

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 OCTOBER 2022

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Report from: Councillor Gary Hackwell – Portfolio Holder for Business Management

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;
- Risk Management;
- Performance Monitoring;
- Commissioning

2. Customer and Business Support (CABS)

2.1 Customer and Business Support (CABS) is the now firmly established service that incorporates the former Business Administration Support Service (BASS) and Customer Contact. This report refers only to activities aligned to what was Customer Contact, as previously defined.

2.2 CABS manages initial customer telephone 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 help enable customers to access services and information, dealing with a proportion of enquiries on a 'one and done' basis, and through controlled 'hand off' to services procedures. CABS forms an essential part of the service delivery chain to customers.

- 2.3 CABS has embraced hybrid working and operates efficiently with managers and officers regularly undertaking a mix of office and home working. Tasks that require an essential office presence, wellbeing checks, 121 meetings, training and provision of support to colleagues, are all activities that bring officers into the office on a rotating basis. This is working well and has not impacted on performance. Whilst this report focuses on telephony activities, alongside specialist functions, CABS operates on a blended role basis. That's to say, a balance is struck between answering the phones and carrying out administration tasks for multiple council services (many of them directly impacting on external customers). This is a balancing act as CABS runs on lean resourcing and seeks to be agile, so officers are moved to where the demand dictates.
- 2.4 Staff retention is a perennial issue for CABS. Very much seen as a front door to a council career, and an opportunity to acquire a broad knowledge of council services and activities, trained officers move on to other departments, usually at a higher grade, or seek (often better paid) careers outside the authority. To illustrate this point, since April 2022, 7 Range 2 staff, predominantly on telephony duties, have left the team. In 2021-22, full year, 18 Range 2 staff in similar roles resigned. This is in addition to resignations in CIS and the management team. The service uses a training and deployment plan as a device to predict and identify staffing gaps and to train officers to maintain performance and for resilience purposes. Transformation opportunities are seized to improve the customer journey but to also help reduce demand. Blended roles are also used to give officers variety in their working routines, and it is hoped that this, coupled with a strong engagement programme, encourages officers to stay with the service.
- 2.5 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, Home Choice, Environment, Waste, Highways, Leisure, School Admissions, Free School Meals and School Transport, and Libraries. In 2021-22, CABS dealt with an average of 32,500 phone enquiries per month. The effect of the pandemic on the volume of phone calls has been closely monitored, with 2019-20 (the last 'normal' year) acting as a baseline. In 2020-21, calls fell away by more than 30% when compared to this baseline; this was at a time when some services closed or offered reduced facilities. Although in 2021-22 call volumes increased, they did not restore to the same level as the baseline year. For 2022-23 calls are crudely projecting to the same level as last year, which is around 20% less than baseline. It's important that we continue to keep surveillance over the volume of calls, as the way forward is not certain, and many factors influence why customers contact the council. It should also be noted that, in real terms, CABS FTE has reduced by approximately 14%, since its inception in October 2018 (in addition to the c.50 FTE that was

removed from the organisation at that point). The CABS Social Care team has just received a directorate Make a Difference award, jointly with Adults' Social Care, in the Community Support category.

- 2.6 Through and since the pandemic, the CABS team has supported additional, previously unseen demand, in respect of enquiries relating to, and the distribution of, various government funded schemes such as the Household Support Fund. Throughout both Covid affected years, CABS remained an important component of the authority's Silver Tactical Command, providing up to date, accurate information and service access to customers, as the stages of lockdown and operations fluctuated. The legacy of this is that CABS is promoted as being central to customer communications regarding council services. CABS was recognised in the 2021 Make a Difference awards, receiving the Customer Service title, and honoured jointly with the broader team through a special award for the council's response to the Covid crisis.
- 2.7 CABS telephony officers support the council's social media activity, identifying and enacting service requests through this channel.
- 2.8 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. A strict appointment only arrangement is in place, and this has helped to better manage footfall and customer service, with a significant proportion of customers being served through other channels, including online and by telephone. In all respects, this continues to work well. Officers based at Kingsley House also help to service 'phone demand.
- 2.9 There are times when demand significantly outstrips available resources. For telephony, this is most notable on the Revenues and Benefits phone lines, where billing runs, and associated reminders and final notices, trigger a high volume of inbound phone calls. Peaks in calls can apply to many of the inbound lines and the team works hard to innovate with changes to call routing and processes, informative front-end messages and the use of a call back option. This is overseen by a daily duty manager, who is data led in refocusing resource where needed. The CABS ethos is very much built on continuous process improvement and transformation, support for the digital agenda and failure demand reduction. Latest thinking really focuses on customer choice regarding the method of contact. The rationale is that many customers already use technology and are, and will be, glad recipients of more self-serve, online facilities. If webpages and e forms are efficient and easy to use, and provide tracking and closure, many customers will prefer this route, rather than waiting in the telephone queue. This has implications for the efficiency of the service and presents opportunities to better serve those most in need of support through traditional channels. Alongside the phone option, this also points the way forward for working with colleagues in community hubs, to enhance a helpful range of services delivered face to face. With all of this in mind, CABS operates its own business improvement activities and works closely with ICT, Digital and Business Change colleagues to make services better for customers. Innovation this year has included changes to the Switchboard and Environment queues, to more quickly and reliably route customers to the correct department. Consideration had been given to

changing the Switchboard phone number from 336000 to the more memorable 333333 to overcome significant customer misunderstanding of 'all the 3s'. Perceived as the switchboard number, as much as 51% of calls (January 2022) into 333333 had to be subsequently re-routed to other lines, causing double-handling, and unnecessarily occupying trained officers, who could be dealing with the range of calls appropriate to their knowledge. Instead of changing the switchboard number, switchboard was diverted into the Environment line and revised customer options installed to allow calls to be filtered and distributed more appropriately. The outcome was that more customers selected the right option at the outset, so their calls were more quickly connected to the correct place (in August 2022 only 14% of calls had to be diverted). Importantly, a Revenues and Benefits improvement programme, operated by CABS, the Medway Revenues and Benefits Service (MRBS), ICT, Finance and Business Change colleagues will tackle work queues, outbound communications, and a 'Citizens Access' portal to improve self-serve opportunities, in the first tranche of the project. One intention is to offer e-Billing in time for the spring, to make life easier for customers and to ease pressure on CABS and MRBS. Working with ICT, other plans include introducing or improving other, easy to use, customer channels such as social media, chat and What's App.

- 2.10 CABS has fully assimilated the new Mitel phone system, working in co-operation with ICT colleagues, and this has brought a number of advantages. As well as improved stability – there have been fewer faults affecting customers – the system offers efficiencies such as the ability to add 'front end messages' to multiple queues in a single transaction (rather than individually) which also enhances the consistency of outbound messages. Ad hoc messages can be scheduled in advance, to cover planned system downtime, for example. Functionality continues to develop but by far the biggest advance has been the provision of 'account codes'. These codes, now available on every phone line, allow officers to define the reason for a customer calling, giving far greater insight into demand hot spots and helping to drive transformation projects. Information can now form part of the conversation in CABS service liaison meetings and lead to an improved understanding of customer demand. For the future, CABS will again work with ICT to develop and introduce alternative contact channels, such as social media, chat and 'What's App', providing customers with a choice of what works best for them.
- 2.11 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. The CIS has a wide client base including Kent & Medway Integrated Care Board (ICB), covering NHS services for Medway, Swale, West Kent, Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley, 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 530 requests per month utilising a pool of c.140 interpreters and translators. The first quarter of 2022-2023 saw an increase to an average of 760 requests

per month. In April 2022, CIS secured a two-year agreement to continue providing services to NHS Primary Care and there may soon be an opportunity to add other elements to the portfolio, depending on discussions with the trust. The CIS continues to progress within the transformation programme, including moving external customers to a pre-payment system, introducing direct dial telephone services, and working with Deaf Services to implement improved access to the council for our Deaf/Deafblind and Hard of Hearing Medway residents. The CIS continues to support the Homes for Ukraine project with both written translation and face to face interpreting for Medway Council, Ashford Refugee Resettlement Centre and the Help for Ukrainians local charity. The team has just been awarded a directorate Make a Difference award (Making a Difference to our Customers' Lives) for its work to support Ukrainian refugees.

- 2.12 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, by phone and email, to patients receiving treatment at the Kent Oncology Centre in Maidstone Hospital, regardless of their place of residence. In 2021-22 the service secured an annual benefit gain of almost £3.6m for clients, which compares well to the £3.3m recorded in 2020-21. Following a very successful review with the charity, continuation of funding was announced in the form of an unprecedented 3-year extension, meaning the service is secure until 31 December 2024. This reflects the high regard in which the service is held. For the same reason, Macmillan has issued an invitation to bid for 'boost funding' to deliver full service to patients of the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS trust area. This is being considered at the time of writing.
- 2.13 In 2022, following the restructure of the Finance and Business Improvement (FBI) Division, CABS became a component of the new sub team formed by the Chief Information Officer (CIO). Working under the CIO, CABS is well-placed, alongside ICT/Technology, Digital and Business Change, to further innovate service delivery, to provide excellent customer service, and to truly offer customer choice. Working closely with these colleagues, CABS will benefit from involvement with technology developments and growth of digital business.

3. Democracy and Governance

3.1 Electoral Services

a) Electoral registration

Annual canvass

- 3.1.1 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
- 3.1.2 These new arrangements have bedded in and the numbers and proportions of households falling into the 3 "route categories have maintained stable.

Route and canvass requirements	Number & percentage of electors	Canvass method
Route 1 properties where all electors have matched against one set of national data	83,197 69.9%	Have been 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 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	35,634 29.9%	Undergoing a canvass process involving the despatch of a paper form, door knocking and e-communications
Route 3 properties such as care homes or student accommodation	162 0.1%	A letter/form outlining who is currently registered to vote at the address has been sent to Warden/Person In Charge and will be followed up by electoral services core team, including encouraging postal vote applications where necessary

3.1.3 Reminder forms are due to be sent to households shortly and the canvass will continue until 13 November.

3.1.4 Unfortunately, because the Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission insisted that the suppliers of electoral registration software prioritised providing statistics for their use, and since then major changes to the software are required because of the introduction of several significant changes by the Elections Act 2022, it has not been possible to do a thorough analysis of the response rates by Route or method of response. However, householders are consistently using the automated response routes rather than completing and sending back paper forms.

b) Ward Boundary Review

3.1.5 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.

3.1.6 New maps showing the new ward and polling district arrangements are being drawn and will be made available to all Councillors and other stakeholders shortly.

3.1.7 It is intended to publish a revised register as a result of the annual canvass on 1 December 2022 and then for the necessary work to be done to create the new register showing the new wards and polling districts by the end of January 2023 so that prospective candidates in the Local and Parish elections have access in order to complete their nomination papers.

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

3.1.8 A full review of polling districts and polling places was needed due to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the recommendations of the Informal Working Party of members were reported to and agreed by Full Council in July 2022.

d) Parish Community Governance Review

3.1.9 The conclusion of the Ward Boundary review also leads to a need to review the electoral arrangements in the Parished area of Medway. Meetings with each Parish Council were held in March and there appeared to be little appetite for major changes although a couple of Parish Councils are suggesting changes to the Parish warding arrangements and increases in the number of Parish Councillors.

3.1.10 A questionnaire is due to be sent out to all the local government electors in the Parished areas of Medway and other interested parties, including the Parish Councils on 20 September with a deadline for completed responses by 25 November and the results and recommendations of the member-officer working party to Council in January 2023. Responses can be made on-line or returning the paper questionnaire.

e) Elections Act 2022

3.1.11 This act introduces several significant changes to elections, summaries as follows:

- require voters to show photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued.
- require Electoral Registration Officers based in local authorities to issue free voter identification documents to those without a valid form of photo ID.
- require postal voters to reapply for a postal vote every three years, replacing current rules of refreshing their signature every five years.
- restrict the handling of postal votes, including limiting the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station.
- further limit the number of people someone may act as proxy for.
- extend accessibility to elections including requiring Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide support for those with a disability in polling stations.
- simplify and clarify the offence of undue influence.
- change the voting and candidacy arrangements for EU voters. No firm implementation date has been advised by the Government.

- allow all British citizens living overseas to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, regardless of when they left the UK. The Government have indicated they intend for this to be implemented in time for the next General Election.

3.1.12 Since the Act received Royal Assent in April 2022, the Government has announced that there will be some changes to the implementation dates of various provisions in the Act. Whilst confirming that Voter ID will come into effect for next year's elections, the implementation has been delayed by a month to January 2023. This means that crucial guidance from the Electoral Commission and the Government will not be available until well into our planning time for the Local and Parish elections which is of some cause for concern. The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), the professional body for electoral administrators has communicated to the Government several times its own concerns about the impact of the relative late timing on electors as well as those planning the conduct of elections.

3.1.13 The provisions relating to handling of postal votes and secrecy measures will now not be implemented until after the May 2023 elections.

f) Local and Parish elections 4 May 2023

3.1.14 Planning arrangements have already started including developing the project plan, contingency and risk register, identifying polling stations as a result of the revised ward and polling district boundaries and the purchase of polling booths and ballot boxes using the capital monies that were identified in the budget. Some initial plans have been developed to take account of the need for voters to prove their identity at polling stations but until more detailed guidance is made available this cannot be progressed with a high level of confidence.

3.1.15 It is intended to include advice about the impact of the Elections Act in the briefings delivered to prospective candidates and agents.

3.1.16 Councillors and Parish Clerks have been advised that the date after which no by-elections have to be held if a vacancy occurs is Tuesday 8 November 2022.

3.2 Member and Mayoral Services

Death of sovereign and Accession of King Charles III

3.2.1 The Member Services team led on the implementation of the plans to mark the sad death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II as well as the Accession of King Charles III. This included a well attended and well-received local proclamation event and location for formal tributes at 2 days' notice. Books of condolence were placed at several locations around Medway within 1 day of

the notification of the sad death of the Queen and these will be collated and stored at the Archives Centre for posterity along with other key documents.

3.3 Award of Honorary Freedom to the Chatham Historic Dockyard trust and Chatham Branch of the Royal Naval Association

3.3.1 The team led the arrangements for the Special Council meeting held on 21 July where it was agreed to award freedom to these two organisations. Officers have started productive meetings to discuss an event for the formal presentation of the Freedom scrolls. It is likely to be held in Spring 2023, avoiding the Local elections.

3.4 Commemoration of three Councillors who died in 2021

3.4.1 Officers are making arrangements for an event to celebrate the lives of the three Councillors who sadly died in 2021 and to unveil brass plaques.

3.5 Sister-city agreement with Foshan, China

3.5.1 To commemorate the 10th anniversary of our sister-city agreement a bronze lion dancer statue has been gifted by the UK Medway Foshan Chancheng Association. A small reception was held in the Mayor's Parlour to unveil the statue and to thank the Association and a formal dinner was held the same evening where Medway's return gift was presented.

3.6 Member development

3.6.1 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 June 2021 and September 2022, 17 sessions have been held, being delivered either remotely or in person. A further 11 scheduled until the end of February 2023. Generally, attendance has been good although a couple of sessions were postponed due to expected attendance numbers being too low to continue.

3.6.2 Officers have had initial discussions about lessons learned from the 2019 Member induction programme and are developing initial plans for the Marketplace event and the Member Induction programme, as well as the roll out of IT kit etc and setting up profiles etc. Following the provision of laptops and training, all Members will receive documents (agendas, reports, briefings) electronically. If a Member wishes to print any such documents they will need to do so at home using their own equipment and supplies facilitated through their basic allowance. Further, to improve IT security, email responses by officers to members will only be made to the Councillors Medway email address for all Council business. This will be stressed in the briefings for

prospective candidates and agents in the lead up to the Local and Parish elections.

- 3.6.3 The number of Mayoral engagements held or scheduled to the end of August 2023 are as follows, with comparisons for previous years:

Mayor and Deputy Mayor engagements attended

Period	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20
Year to date (May onwards)	96	201	38	263
May - August	96	44	11	96
Sept - December		94	22	157
Jan - April		28	24	51

- 3.6.4 Each year the Mayor chooses 1 or more charities to support and the team organise several events at which money is raised through ticket sales and raffles for those charities. The amount raised varies significantly between each Mayoral year – between £4000 and £9000 in recent (pre-covid) years.
- 3.6.5 Some specific events are organised to highlight and promote the best about Medway. So far this year the Mayor has held a successful Call the Midwife Tour event held at Chatham Historic Dockyard attended by 28 people, including Mayors from LB Hounslow, LB Bromley, Maidstone, Faversham, Sevenoaks, Folkestone and New Romney.
- 3.6.6 Unfortunately a tour of Upnor Castle on 14 September was postponed due to the sad death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Other events are being planned to highlight features and attractions in Medway as well as popular Indian and Chinese meals.
- 3.6.7 In terms of civic events, the team have successfully delivered a range of events since last year including Dedication services at Rochester Cathedral in October 2021 and June 2022, co-ordinated alongside Rochester Royal British Legion, the Annual Remembrance Service in November 2021, the annual Prisoner of War memorial service at the St George's Centre in November 2021, and a luncheon for senior dignitaries to celebrate the work of the incoming and outgoing High Sheriff. Various flag raising ceremonies at Gun Wharf have also taken place. Unfortunately, the meeting of Admiralty Court and the Admiral's Cruise was cancelled in respect of the sad death of Queen Elizabeth II. Officers are already working on arrangements for this years' Remembrance Services and the Prisoner of War Memorial service.

3.7 Democratic Services

- 3.7.1 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.
- 3.7.2 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).
- 3.7.3 Since the last report to Committee (1 July 2021), the following achievements are highlighted, in addition to dealing with day-to-day operational priorities:
- 3.7.4 Ongoing work with ICT colleagues and our AV Contractor to support livestreamed meetings. The Leader of the Council confirmed that meetings would be livestreamed on a permanent basis from July 2021 and ICT took on responsibility for the provision of this service from November 2021, with our AV contractor continuing to provide his usual support for Full Council meetings and providing back up for ICT for the livestreaming of meetings.
- 3.7.5 The team worked with colleagues in Public Health, Legal Services and Health and Safety to ensure the safe return to in person meetings, in compliance with Government guidance with regards to the pandemic, for meetings held up until 19 July 2021. The team continued to liaise with Group Leaders regarding attendance at meetings throughout the year. Meetings returned to having full numbers of Members in attendance from 1 September 2021 (except for 8 January 2022 – 11 February 2022 when Group Leaders informally agreed that meetings would be held with reduced numbers of Members in attendance at meetings owing to the Pandemic). Group Leaders also agreed that individual Members continue to be socially distanced if they requested, albeit only a very small number of Members still require this facility.
- 3.7.6 Further to the comments set out in paragraph 3.6.2 above, around 50% of Councillors remain fully or partially paperless. Further work to support improved take up is planned for the second half of the current municipal year and support will be provided following the local elections next year to support paperless working.
- 3.7.7 Full Council agreed in October 2021 a waiver for all Members regarding the requirement to attend at least one meeting every 6 months until the Annual Council meeting in May 2022. This means that each Member must attend at least one formal meeting by 18 November 2022. Group Whips are kept updated on this issue and the Head of Democratic Services liaises with the two Independent Members as necessary.

- 3.7.8 A review of political balance was presented to Full Council in October 2021 to reflect the outcome of the by-elections held in August 2021. This resulted in some very minor changes to the allocation of committee seats. There was a by-election in December 2020, however, this did not trigger a review of political balance.
- 3.7.9 Three special Council meetings were held during this period, firstly, in October 2021 (to confer the title of Honorary Alderman and Honorary Alderwoman on former Members Glyn Griffiths, Tom Mason and Julie Shaw), July 2022 (Conferment of Honorary Freedom to Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust and the Chatham Branch of The Royal Naval Association) and September 2022 (call in referral – Future Hoo Progress Report).
- 3.7.10 The Democratic Services Team, with support from Legal Services, worked with colleagues from Kent County Council (KCC) and the Kent and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group regarding the disestablishment of the Kent and Medway Joint Health and Wellbeing Board ahead of the new arrangements on 1 July 2022 regarding the creation of the Kent and Medway NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the establishment of the Integrated Care Partnership Joint Committee with KCC and the ICB.
- 3.7.11 The team continues to work with report authors to ensure that reports are accessible in support of the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018.
- 3.7.12 An informal meeting between Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen and Opposition Spokespersons and the Assistant Director, Legal and Governance and Democratic Services staff was held in January 2022. In particular, the length of O&S meetings was discussed. Actions were taken forward on a trial basis (e.g. limiting agendas to a maximum of 5 reports) and the Business Support O&S Committee has subsequently affirmed that each Committee has its own ethos and there should be a flexibility in approach to meetings. In support of this, agenda planning meetings are used to help ensure that meetings are focused, for example, to seek alternative ways of providing information to Members such as briefing notes.
- 3.7.13 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. The workshops have also been used to discuss a specific item in an upcoming meeting in order to gain in depth background information to enable development of informed questioning strategies in the formal meeting. 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.

- 3.7.14 The Committee has taken part in a Local Government Association (LGA) pilot programme to support political and corporate leadership for children's services. The training sessions involved discussions and brainstorming on effective steps and barriers to scrutiny, work programming, partnership working and how to implement and drive forward change. The sessions provided useful tools to enable Members to push forward their vision for improved outcomes and effective children's scrutiny for Medway. It was recommended by the LGA that the training information provided be used as part of the Member Induction programme following the May 2023 local elections.
- 3.7.15 The GP Access Task Group was established in mid-2022 with the following terms of reference: To review the access to GPs across Medway to explore whether the number of GPs and primary care staff in Medway is sufficient to meet the needs of the population and how the covid-19 pandemic has affected access to primary care.
- 3.7.16 The Task Group is scheduled to report back to the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2022 and Cabinet in January 2023 (with a report to Health and Wellbeing Board in February 2022). Whilst every effort will be made to work to this timetable, in practice, the pace is determined by Members and their availability and also the degree to which evidence can be gathered within these timescales.

4. Audit and Counter Fraud

- 4.1 The Internal Audit and Counter Fraud (IA&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. Officers within the service were originally multi-disciplinary, undertaking work in both internal audit and counter fraud, but returned to designated roles in each function with effect from 01 April 2021 after a trial period during 2020-21.
- 4.2 The IA 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 Programme (QAIP) that is used to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of IA 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 2022, with the QAIP being approved in March 2022.
- 4.3 IA assurance activity is driven by the annual internal audit plan, which is approved by the Audit Committee. The plan for 2021-22 was developed in January/February 2021 to target the highest areas of risk for the authority and approved by the Audit Committee in March 2021. The volume of assurance reviews to be completed is based on a projected resources available for the

year but changes in staffing during the year impacted on these projections. As a consequence, the plan was amended in year to reflect the reduction in resources available, with all revisions to the plan agreed by the Audit Committee.

- 4.4 A survey was sent to all Service Managers, CMT and Members in May 2022 to gauge the level of satisfaction with services received from IA. The survey covered a number of areas, including awareness of the team, communication, the IA plan, compliance with IIA core principles, and overall satisfaction. The responses were extremely limited in number and identified some areas for improvement but 100% of those responding confirmed positive satisfaction with services received.
- 4.5 There has been staff turnover and a restructure within the team. This was prompted by the resignation of an internal audit team leader, with the post replaced with a senior internal auditor, which was filled by an officer within the existing team. This left a vacancy for an internal auditor, which was successfully filled but there was a further resignation of an internal auditor who subsequently left at the end of May 2022. A new internal audit apprentice is due to fill the vacancy within the team from October 2022.
- 4.6 CF activity is also detailed in the annual workplan but is largely dictated by the volume of fraud referrals received and the levels of investigative activity necessary. The volume of investigation work has meant that other counter fraud activity, such as fraud awareness and pro-active exercises, has been limited in the last few years.
- 4.7 A CF survey was issued to all staff across the council in May 2022-2022 to gauge the level of satisfaction with services received. The survey covered a number of areas, including awareness of the team, communication, fraud awareness, reporting concerns, compliance with core principles, and overall satisfaction. 200 responses were received and identified a lack of awareness of the team and what it does as well as a lack of fraud awareness in general. However, of the 19 respondents who had received services from the team in the last two years, 84% gave a positive response to overall satisfaction.
- 4.8 There was some staff turnover in year with the resignation of counter fraud officer in September 2021, resulting in several moves within the team as well as recruitments. The team was back to a full establishment from February 2022 but despite the disruptions, there was still a good level of service delivery, with almost £900,000 in fraud savings identified.
- 4.9 The Audit Committee received three updates during the year, detailing progress with planned activity in both IA and CF, and outturns against all performance measures. More recently the latest annual report for the IA&CF Shared Service was presented to Audit Committee in June 2022, with final performance against key targets for 2021-22 as follows:
 - 90% of the agreed assurance work delivered (target 95%);

- 100% of actions to address risks agreed by client management (target 90%); and
- 85% of available resources spent on chargeable work (target 85%);
- £180,6876 of historic Council tax identified (resulting in additional £110,041pa in future years), £24,919, in Housing Benefit overpayments, £50,000 in incorrectly paid business grants, £245,842 in new Business Rate liabilities and notional savings of £287,000 linked to the recovery of three council properties and two applicants being removed from the housing register, all resulting from investigative activity.

4.10 Due to the changes in the way the service operates, there are now separate plans for IA and CF. The IA plans are now also agreed on a six-monthly basis rather than annually, to ensure resource continues to be focused on the highest areas of risk. Update reports for both areas will be presented to the Audit Committee three times each year, followed by annual reports. The first of these update reports were presented to the Audit Committee in September 2022.

4.11 In November/December the team will begin the planning process to prepare the IA work plan for Q1-Q2 of 2023-24.

5. Revenue and Benefits

a) Council Tax

5.1 Council Tax collection for 2021/22 was 94.0%. This is the same as the previous financial year, despite the fact that the after-effects of the pandemic are still being felt, with some people struggling to catch up with payments missed during 2020/21, and court time being severely restricted.

5.2 The Government announced in February 2022 that local authorities would be responsible for delivering the council tax energy rebates of £150 per household and guidance and funding were received in March 2022. This required new software to be developed by NEC as well as an online application process to gather bank details from non-direct debit payers. Despite having to implement these new processes alongside dealing with existing workloads, 60,000 payments totalling £9m were made by the beginning of May and a further 38,000 council tax payers have received well over £5m paid to their nominated bank account, or credited to their council tax account. While the process was managed by the existing council tax team, a team of staff from NEC were also engaged to provide telephone and email support using new burdens funding that was received.

b) Business Rates

5.3 Collection of business rates during 2021/22 was 97.4%, more than 3% up on the previous year and the highest for three years. This was due in part to the Government funded Covid-19 Additional Relief Fund (CARF) which was

awarded at the end of March 2022 (see 5.5). However, collection rates have continued at a high level during 2022/23, currently exceeding pre-pandemic performance (52.54% compared to 50.03% in 2019/20).

- 5.4 Following the council's successful rollout of Government grants to businesses during the pandemic, the Government announced a further grant scheme in December 2021 (Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grants) which, following receipt of guidance during January 2022, involved the creation of an online application form and resulted in 334 businesses receiving more than £1.1m by the end of March 2022.
- 5.5 Further business rate reliefs were introduced by the Government in respect of the current and previous financial years:
- Covid-19 Additional Relief Fund (CARF) – announced in December 2021, this relief was to be applied to the 2021/22 financial year. Unlike many other authorities, the council implemented a scheme to distribute the available funding before the end of the financial year so that the credits were showing on the annual bills for 2022/23. This has resulted in 962 business properties benefitting from a reduction in their business rate payments of £4.7m.
 - Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief – announced in the October 2021 budget, with guidance being issued at the end of December 2021. Again this scheme was implemented in time for annual billing at the end of February 2022 resulting in 1,167 business properties receiving a £4.9m reduction in their business rate liabilities.
 - Two additional reliefs were introduced due to the delay in the revaluation of business properties which was originally due to be implemented in April 2022 but has been delayed to April 2023. Due to understandable delays in software development, it was not possible to implement the Transitional Relief and Supporting Small Business Relief schemes prior to annual billing and these will be applied to the relevant business rate accounts during the third quarter of 2022/23.

c) Energy Rebate Discretionary Scheme

- 5.6 The Council was also provided with £604,350 to assist people on low incomes in bands E to H under a discretionary scheme. We will pay a single payment of £150 to any household in Council Tax band E to H that:
- receive a Council Tax Reduction
 - receive a disabled banding reduction in bands F to H
 - are entitled to a Council Tax exemption under:
 - class S - occupied solely by people under the age of 18
 - class U - occupied solely by those with a severe mental impairment.
- 5.7 A one-off payment of £50 will be paid to households who live in a room within a house of multiple occupation (HMO) where:

- the owner is liable for the Council Tax bill
- the household are liable for the energy bills.

5.8 A one-off payment of £150 will be paid if a household is not entitled to any payment under this scheme or the mandatory scheme where a household is responsible for energy bills and suffering hardship.

d) Benefits Performance

5.9 The number of days taken to process claims (combined i.e., Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme) in 2021/2022 averaged 10.31 days showing an improvement from 11.08 days in 2020/2021.

5.10 One of the other national measures is the Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Indicator which demonstrates our ability to pay 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.

e) UC Migration

5.11 In April 2022, the government outlined plans to resume helping claimants to move to Universal Credit by the end of 2024. The process resumed on 9 May 2022 with 500 (250 per area) claimants in Medway and Bolton being selected for managed migration.

5.12 The claimants, selected from any of the legacy benefits, receive a Migration Notice from the DWP. The notice provides the claimant with three months to claim Universal Credit to continue receiving financial support. On Universal Credit, most people will be entitled to the same amount they received within their legacy benefits or more. However, should the amount of Universal Credit be less, a top up called transitional protection is available.

5.13 Medway Council's role within this test is limited to ensure a clean test and we support any Housing Benefit customers in the same way we would if they had naturally migrated to Universal Credit. The DWP are operating a specific Universal Credit Migration Notice helpline for customers who need assistance.

5.14 When a customer makes a claim for Universal Credit, we are sent a stop notice which effectively tells us to cease paying Housing Benefit and consider the 2-week transition payment for the customer who is moving onto Universal Credit, the new process ensures that we also provide the current entitlement to ensure that transitional protection is correctly calculated. When UC went live in May 2018, Medway had 17,527 active claims for Housing Benefit, we now have 9,397 (as of 31 July 2022) with 5,409 of those being claims from working age claimants.

f) Council Tax Reduction

- 5.15 Section 13A(1)(a) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 prescribes that Medway Council is required to have a Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS).
- 5.16 Since 2013/2014 the Council has had to consider annually whether to revise its scheme or to replace it with a replacement scheme. Any revision to the CTRS or a replacement CTRS must be the subject of consultation. The scheme consists of two parts, the first part makes provision for working age claimants which the Council has discretion to decide. The other makes provision for pension age claimants and the scheme is agreed nationally.
- 5.17 On 3 August 2021, Cabinet noted proposed changes for the 2022/2023 scheme.

The aims being

- to simplify the scheme for both applicants, current claimants and the service by moving away from the current means tested reduction to an income-based discount based on percentage bandings and income-grid scheme more aligned to council tax discounts than benefits. This is commonly known as a “banded scheme “. The latest published scheme summary (for 2020/2021) indicate that 72 local authorities had a banded scheme.
 - To provide greater stability to those in receipt of Council Tax Reduction whilst making the scheme work better with Universal Credit
 - To provide additional protection
 - To make the scheme more transparent and easier to understand
- 5.18 Cabinet approved a public consultation on the proposed changes which took place between 1 October 2021 and 24 December 2021 (12 weeks) to which 819 people/organisations responded to the consultation
- 5.19 At Full Council on 24 February 2022, members agreed a new Council Tax Reduction scheme. This agreement followed lengthy consultation and governance work in preparation. Full details are contained within the reports for that meeting
<https://democracy.medway.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=122&MId=5134> .

Band/Discount percent	Single person	Couple with no children or young person	Couple or Lone Parent with one child/young person	Couple or Lone Parent with two or more children/young persons
Band 1* 65%	£0 to £94.99	£0 to £129.99	£0 to £179.99	£0 to £239.99
Band 2 55%	£95 to £139.99	£130 to £174.99	£180 to £229.99	£240 to £289.99
Band 3 45%	£140 to £184.99	£175 to £219.99	£230 to £279.99	£290 to £339.99
Band 4 35%	£185 to £229.99	£220 to £264.99	£280 to £329.99	£340 to £389.99
Band 5 20%	£230 to £269.99	£265 to £309.99	£330 to £379.99	£390 to £449.99
Band 6 0%	£270+	£310+	£380+	£450+

5.20 Inevitably, with every new scheme there are those who gain entitlement and some who see a reduction. In March 2022, the Council wrote to any recipient of Council tax Reduction who would have seen any reduction to their support in order to invite claims to the new Exceptional Hardship Scheme.

5.21 Under the new scheme and alongside the cost-of-living crisis, we are seeing an increase in the number of Council Tax Reduction claims received. The caseload has risen from 15,081 as of 31 March 2022 to 15,406 as at 31 July 2022

h) Discretionary Housing Payments

5.22 The total funding for DHPs within England and Wales for 2022 is £100million, reduced from £140 million in 2021. Medway has been awarded £474,331 for 2022 to provide additional assistance to those who receive either Housing Benefit or Housing Costs within their Universal Credit award. This has reduced from £683,113 in 2021. The Department for Work and Pensions have reserved £2 million of funding for distribution later in the year.

5.23 In quarter 1 of 2022, 248 applications have been made and awards to the value of £60,745 have been paid from the fund.

5.24 In 2021, the Council spent £667,801 of its budget, having received 767 applications, and making 574 awards. 193 requests for assistance were refused, most commonly because either the household was deemed not to be in hardship, information was not provided to support the claim, or the claimant was not eligible for a payment.

g) Household Support Fund

- 5.25 In September 2021, the government announced the introduction of a new fund known as the Household Support Fund. The fund ran from 6 October 2021 to 31 March with Medway awarded £2,262,431.11. Within the first tranche, the Council spent £1.9m and whilst the fund was renewed from 1 April 2022, the unspent funding could not be rolled forwards, however that point was only made clear to the Council on 1 April 2022.
- 5.26 The fund from April 2022 to September 2022 remains at £2,262.431.11. On Tuesday, 26 April, the Leader used urgency powers to approve a report on the Household Support Fund 2022/23
democracy.medway.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=115&MId=5481
- 5.27 We were awarded £2,262,463.11 in government funding to support residents facing financial difficulties who are struggling to pay their energy, food and water bills. At least a third of the funding had to be ring-fenced to support households with children, another third had to be ringfenced to support pensioners and the remaining third needed to be allocated to other households in need.
- 5.28 The third tranche of funding has been confirmed from October 2022 to March 2023, with Medway's allocation remaining at £2,262,463.11. The conditions for spending the grant have again been changed by the Government however, due to the popularity and demand on the grant scheme, delegated powers have been used to continue to support Medway residents through the scheme whilst the distribution of the funding is agreed.

i) Test and Trace Support Payments

- 5.29 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. The scheme ended in April 2022 with Medway Council providing over £2 million worth of assistance to its residents.

6. Corporate Debt

- 6.1 The concept of a Corporate Debt Team (CDT) following an initial trial became permanent from 1 April 2020. A new structure was designed and permission to recruit to vacancies agreed towards the end of 2020 / 21 and recruitment to vacancies took place during the first quarter of 2021 / 22. The team are responsible for recovering Council Tax and Business Rates post summons stage, Housing Benefit Overpayments and Sundry Debt income.

- 6.2 During the COVID-19 pandemic recovery action was paused in respect of all debt categories and reconnection letters were issued when lockdowns eased. No court action could be taken for Council Tax or Business Rates as courts were not dealing with civil matters, consequently some households and businesses have now found themselves in a position where they have arrears accrued multiple years of debt. Furthermore, the cost-of living crisis will be additional pressure on households and businesses going forward.
- 6.3 The courts reopened in 2021 / 2022 however court time was significantly restricted compared to pre pandemic years. With careful planning courts were maximised, and Liability Orders were 14,000 Liability Orders obtained securing the councils interest in £21m and where possible costs applied to accounts where multiple years were involved were applied once. (In 2019 / 20 Liability Orders were granted against 12,000 households securing £12m).
- 6.4 Following court action alternative remedies to recover Council Tax and Business Rates are permitted, allowing in certain circumstances longer term arrangements and a more holistic approach to recovering total arrears due.
- 6.5 Investment in new software offered each case an automatic arrangement to pay the summons and the opportunity to make an alternative proposal based on affordability. The collection rate for 2021 / 22 was 94% for Council Tax and 97.4% or Business Rates.
- 6.6 The new Sundry Debt members of the Corporate Debt team initially focused on aged debt (365+) totalling £4.6m and by 31 March 2022 this had reduced to £2.5m, with minimal write offs during this period. Capturing full debtor information at the point of raising the invoice via e-forms introduced in the previous year has enabled the team to proactively chase debt on behalf of services from 60 days onwards, maintaining the over 365-day arrears and stabilising provisions agreed for aged 'bad debt'.
- 6.7 A Corporate Debt Forum was established in December 2021, chaired by Councillor Hackwell and attended by various Heads of Service. The forum has successfully aligned write off procedures across the authority, reviewed and revised the Councils Corporate Debt Policy, is scrutinising risk and identifying service areas that may be served by upfront / prepayment rather than a 'buy now pay later' method of income generation. Prepayment was successfully introduced for an element of Streetworks and Community Interpreting in 2021 / 22. Following this success Traffic Management are looking at converting to prepayment, they currently generate invoices to the value of £400k, (400 invoices).
- 6.8 Recovered income from overpaid Housing Benefit received via direct payments and Department for Work and Pension (DWP) third party deductions was £1.4m in 2021 /22, an increase of £100k compared to the Pandemic year. Housing Benefit overpayments created in 2021/22 totalled £2.3m (2020 / 21 £2m). Overall housing benefit debt due on invoices has reduced by £1.1m to £7.6m and there was an increase in debts passed to the DWP to make third party

deductions, the income raised via this method was £281k in 2021/22 (£121k 2020/21).

- 6.9 In May 2022 a joint procurement process led by the Corporate Debt Manager aligned the process to renew the Enforcement Agent contracts for Corporate Debt and Parking Services resulted in the appointment of 2 contractors for each service (one being common to both).
- 6.10 Vulnerability, affordability and financial welfare is an increasing household pressure and in the very near future the Corporate Debt team will be supporting the newly created Benefits and Financial Welfare team to introduce supportive initiatives for customers in debt.

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 Corporate Management Team, Audit Committee, Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. The last review was considered by the Audit Committee on 04 January 2022 and Cabinet on 08 February 2022.
- 7.4 Following the easing of Covid19 restrictions, the Council has returned to following the risk management procedures outlined in the 2022/23 Risk Strategy.
- 7.5 The 2023/24 Risk Strategy will be reviewed and presented to Audit Committee on 03 January 2023, Business Support Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 26 January 2023, and Cabinet on 07 February 2023.

8. Performance Monitoring

- 8.1 The [2022/23 Council Strategy and Plan](#) were agreed at Full Council in February 2022. It sets out the Council's three priorities and six values 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 50 measures of success.
- 8.2 Monitoring of Council Plan Performance continues to take place on a quarterly basis, through Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny committees, evidencing the Council's commitment to be accountable. Monitoring focuses 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 2021/22 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. 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 achievements in 2021/22 set out against our three priorities are shown in Appendix 1: 2021/22 achievements.
- 8.4 At the beginning of 2022, the Corporate Performance team merged with Human Resources as part of the wider restructure of the Finance and Business Improvement (FBI) division.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Performance Monitoring 2021/22 achievements

Background documents

None