

# Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No. 01/24-25

Date: May 2024

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Business Support Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Holding to Account – Portfolio Holder for Business Management Responses requested to Member Questions - 4 April 2024.

## Summary:

Following Business Support Overview and Scrutiny on 4 April, questions were asked by members and the Finance and Business Improvement (FBI) Division agreed to produce a briefing note to address these questions.

## Responses requested to Member Questions:

- 1. Performance Data – A Member commented that performance data for Customer Contact, Complaints and Blue Badges was described as good and requested further detail be provided regarding that data. The Portfolio Holder for Business Management undertook to provide that information to the Committee outside of the meeting. (Paragraph 5.2 of the report refers).**

### Response on CABS telephony performance data:

During the period April 2023 – January 2024 the Percentage of Calls Answered (PCA) was above target, achieving more than 90% across all telephone queue groups.

During 2023-24, 95% of Blue Badges were processed within the 12 week target defined by the government's Department for Transport. A total of 6,789 Blue Badge applications were received from Medway residents.

### Response on complaints:

During the period 1 April 2023 to 31 January 2024:

A total of 1,101 stage one complaints were received; year to date performance reflected that 87.6% of these complaints were answered on time, exceeding the council's 10-day response target of 80%.

For the same period 143 stage two complaints were received; these are typically more complex to investigate and answer and performance reached 73.5% at the end of Q3, falling just short of the council's 15-day response target of 75%. This target was, however, met by year end.

Performance was strong in both Children's and Adult's social care complaints, with Children's Social Care achieving 91.7% and Adult Social Care achieving 95.5% by the end of Q3, both far exceeding the council's target of 75%.

The council continues to receive many encouraging compliments about its corporate service, with more than one compliment received for every three complaints.

**2. Discretionary Housing Payments – Further information was requested in relation to the remaining monies available in relation to discretionary housing payments, the Portfolio Holder undertook to provide further information outside the meeting. (Paragraph 6.1.4 of the report refers)**

Discretionary housing payments. Medway has been awarded £484,162 for 2023 and £396,386 has been paid from the fund. The Cllr asked what has happened to the remaining £87,776. The 2023 fund runs from April 2023 until March 2024. The fund was fully spent except for £139. The remaining money occurred because of a last-minute change which meant that payment was not needed.

**3. Household Support Fund – It was commented that it was unclear the total made in payments to Medway residents from the Household Support Fund (paragraph 6.1.6 refers), the Portfolio Holder stated she would provide a corrected figure outside of the meeting. (paragraph 6.1.6 of the report refers)**

Since its inception in October 2021, the Council has spent just under £11,000,000 (£10,958,100) from the Household Support Fund:

| <b>Tranche</b> | <b>Spend</b> |
|----------------|--------------|
| <b>1</b>       | £1,908,248   |
| <b>2</b>       | £2,262,463   |
| <b>3</b>       | £2,262,463   |
| <b>4</b>       | £4,524,926   |

**4. Liability Orders for Recovery of Council Tax – it was queried what the result was of increasing the summons cost and the introduction of Liability costs and whether there were any costs to the Council associated with Liability orders. The Portfolio Holder stated she did not have that information and would provide it outside of the meeting. (paragraph 6.4.4 of the report refers)**

**Liability Orders for non- payment of Council Tax**

A Liability Order granted by the Magistrates Court for Non- Payment of Council Tax provides the council with further recovery remedies such as entitlement to the name and address of an employer, and to information on income. It allows the council to apply for Third Party Deductions from Department for Work and Pensions benefits, Attachment to Earnings Orders and protects the Councils interest in the debt until the balance is settled which can also be via agreed payment plans.

The Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992 provide for the Council to apply for a sum equal to the costs reasonably incurred in obtaining

the Liability Order. The associated Summons Costs relate to court fees, overheads, Revenues and Customer and Business Support staffing costs to the date the Council makes the request to Magistrates Court to issue a summons.

Following the request to issue the summons up until the date of the Liability Order application additional costs can be charged; these are associated with the Corporate Debt and Benefits and Financial Welfare teams staffing costs and overheads.

The Council is allocated approximately 6 pre-arranged Liability Order court dates in each financial year and in 2023 – 2024 made a request to the Magistrates Court to issue 13,000 households with a Summons due to Non- Payment of Council Tax.

The last review of Summons Costs was in 2013 and at that time they were calculated at £80.07; the Council has not applied for Liability Order costs to date. Summons costs have been reviewed for 2024 – 25 applications and they amount £1.374m or £100.00 per Liability Order and the contribution towards this for 2024 – 25 will be £95.00 per case.

Liability Order costs have not been charged to date; the cost to the Council has been calculated at £368,613 for 2024 – 25 or £27.00 per Liability Order and upon making the application at the Magistrates Court there will be a request for a contribution of £25.00 per case.

Summons and Liability Order costs are therefore mainly recovered by those in default and not residents who pay as legally required.

Once a Liability Order is obtained it remains payable until the full balance, including the costs, has been settled. Some households have more than one financial year where a Liability Order has been obtained and whilst it is encouraged that the current year is paid as it becomes due, some households do have multiple years and therefore balances are discharged by paying the oldest year first.

Therefore, over time payment towards the costs associated with obtaining a Liability Order has been realised as follows:

- 2018 / 19 costs paid to date amount to 81% or £657,597.
- 2019 / 20 costs paid to date amount to 74% or £568,804.
- 2021 / 22 costs paid to date amount to 60% or £539,175.
- (2021 / 22 included 2020 / 21 arrears as there were no Liability Order hearings during the Pandemic year).

| Summons costs  | £                |
|--|------------------|
| Payment to court   | 8,201            |
| Printing and Stationery                                  | 12,784           |
| Postage  | 32,122           |
| Staffing costs (including Customer and Business Support) | 105,6295         |
| Staffing overheads                                       | 15,123           |
| Support costs  | 139,725          |
| IT costs   | <u>109,635</u>   |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>1,373,885</b> |
| <b>Number of liability orders</b>                        | <b>13,700</b>    |
| <b>Summons costs per liability order</b>                 | <b>100</b>       |

| Liability order costs                                   | £              |
|---|----------------|
| Staffing costs including Benefits and Financial Welfare | 325,639        |
| Staffing overheads                                      | 715            |
| Support costs   | <u>42,259</u>  |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>368,613</b> |

(Number of Liability orders above includes 700 business rate applications).

- 5. Customer and Business Support (CABS) – Further information was requested in relation to staff retention, call waiting times and causes of the fall in numbers of calls being received, the Portfolio Holder stated that call waiting times were reasonable and staff were dealing with the pressure, she undertook to provide a more detailed response outside of the meeting.**

**Response for CABS staff retention:**

During the year 2023-24, CABS had a retention rate of 87% across the service. Of the 13% turnover, 5% was through retirement and the remaining 8% left the service. CABS is seen by some as a gateway to employment with the council; once engaged and experienced, they identify and obtain jobs with other council services or outside the authority.

**Response on call answered timescales:**

Between the dates April 2023 and January 2024, the following telephone queue groups' performance in respect of answered calls, measured against our 'self-imposed' target timescales were as follows:

| Queue Group | Answered within 2 minutes (target 80%) | Answered within 5 minutes  | Answered within 10 minutes |
|-------------|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Switchboard | 90%                                    | 98%                        | 100%                       |
| Baseline    | 67%                                    | 82%                        | 92%                        |
| Dedicated   | 65%                                    | 82%                        | 93%                        |
| Social Care | 92%                                    | 99%                        | 100%                       |
| Queue Group | Answered within 5 minutes (target 60%) | Answered within 10 minutes | Answered within 15 minutes |
| Revs & Bens | 70%                                    | 87%                        | 94%                        |

The call answering 'tail', i.e. calls answered beyond the target time, is closely monitored, to give assurances that calls are still answered within reasonable timescales where they fall outside of the target. The above tables reflect that significant percentages of calls were answered within 5 minutes, and almost all within 10 minutes.

**Response on decrease in the numbers of calls:**

During, and since, Covid there has been a decline in telephone calls and an increase in online/self-serve use. This will include customers completing an online form, making an online booking to visit a Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) or to make a payment. Some examples have been provided below:-

- 99%, or a monthly average of 15,745 HWRC bookings, have been made online compared to 1% made via the telephone in the year 2023/24.
- The number of Blue Badge payments made online has increased from 55% in 2019/20 to 69% in 2023/24.
- The number of payments made online, which includes Council Tax and Parking Charge Notices has increased by 21% in 2023/24.
- Work continues to provide a range of contact options for customers and to make the customer experience the best it can be.

- 6. It was also requested that further information was provided as to the number of abandoned calls, calls relating to the work of different departments and performance of staff working at home the Portfolio Holder agreed this would also be provided.**

**Response on abandoned calls:**

During the period April 2023 – January 2024 CABS telephone queue groups experienced abandoned calls at the following levels:

- Baseline queue group had a PCA (Percentage of Calls Answered) of 91%, therefore 9% of calls abandoned which equates to approximately 4,600 calls.
- Dedicated queue group had a PCA of 92%, therefore 8% of calls abandoned which equates to approximately 3,400 calls.
- Switchboard had a PCA of 99%, therefore 1% abandoned which equates to 862 calls.
- Revenue and Benefits queue group had a PCA of 93%, therefore 7% of calls abandoned which equates to just over 3,000 calls.
- Social Care had a PCA of 99%, therefore 1% abandoned which equates to 645 calls.

The service uses flexible front-end messages, call backs, and management intervention in an effort to minimise call abandonment. Sadly, at times, demand simply outstrips the available resources, but it is very likely that a customer would simply call back at another time and be dealt with.

**Response on performance of staff working at home:**

Across the council, each service area monitors performance through objectives, regular 121s and in some cases systems, for example in Legal they use Iken

case management system, this is monitored consistency across the whole workforce, regardless of working location.

Within the CABS service, as an example, there are adequate controls, information and performance management mechanisms to ensure that officers are working effectively (e.g. we can track which agents are handling or available for calls), so that customers are receiving the best possible service and to ensure our staff are supported in the work they do, whether they are working in the office or from home.

- 7. Older Person's and Disabled Bus Pass – A Member queried how many bus pass applications had been rejected, the Portfolio Holder undertook to provide that detailed information outside of the meeting.**

**Response on Older Person's and Disabled Bus Passes**

CABS assess and process Older Person and Disabled Person's Bus Passes for the Integrated Transport Service as an administration support function, which includes assessment for eligibility, where required, by our Occupational Therapists. The same Occupational Therapists also assess eligibility of customers for Blue Badges under that scheme. In terms of applications rejected:

- 3 customers were not eligible for Older Person Passes during the time period of April 2023 – January 2024
- 28 customers were not eligible for Disabled Person Passes during the same time period.

- 8. My Council Tax Online – it was commented that the take up of the Council Tax online portal and paperless billing was a positive development, a Member asked whether the scheme had reduced the number of calls to CABS from residents to find out their Council Tax balance which was previously 7% of all calls to CABS, in addition what could be done to incentivise further take up of the My Council Tax online scheme by residents The Portfolio Holder stated she would provide that information outside of the meeting.**

**Response on the impact of MCTO on call volumes relating to CT balance:**

Due to changes in how account codes were reported in June 2023, it's not possible to accurately speak about call volumes specifically relating to this single specific query. However, since the implementation of MCTO, the total volume of phone calls to the Revenues phone line have reduced by around 22-25%. There will be a number of factors influencing this, and MCTO is clearly one key element.

**Response on what could be done to incentivise further take up of MCTO:**

We now have a QR code on the envelopes that takes people directly to the portal and this was in place for annual billing. We are still averaging over 200 sign ups per week and this doubled during the weeks when the bills arrived.

We went live in April with new modules for moves and single person discount applications and cancellations. As this is all part of the online portal, we are anticipating that more residents will sign up for an account and paperless billing when they go to report a change.

We also plan to run another take up campaign later in the year to promote the additional features that are now available.

The project team has been working very hard to boost take-up and feedback from our supplier, NEC, is that our performance is very good. Currently, more than 1:8 of our ratable properties have signed up.

Many activities have already taken place to incentivise sign ups, and the more successful methods will be repeated at appropriate intervals. Internally, promotion has been via:

- MedSpace
- staff newsletters
- emails to colleagues

Externally, publicity has been targeted through:

- Information in Medway Matters
- posting on social media platforms (several times) including Facebook and Twitter (now 'X')
- the despatch of 43,653 customer emails
- the sending of 23,256 text messages directly to Revenues customers

In addition, the team has worked hard to ensure that the website directs customers efficiently, and that back-office systems in MRBS and call interactions in CABS lead customers towards making the digital choice.

The biggest improvement recently is the addition of extra modules to the MCTO system, so as well as checking their balance and creating/amending a DD, customers are now able to manage moves in and out of properties, single person discounts, and special arrangements online. This holistic approach means that more customers, for a variety of reasons, will benefit from signing up, and we are seeing an average of 200-250 new sign-ups per week naturally without any marketing activities.

**9. A Member commented that it was surprising that 673 contracts had been issued, which equated to nearly a third of the staff, the portfolio holder stated that a of new staff had been taken on then subsequently left the Council which accounted for some of the higher figure, she offered to provide detailed information following the meeting.**

Our recruitment team support the recruitment activity for schools and Gravesham Borough Council. Below is a break down of the contracts issued.

| Permanent | Casual | Gravesham | Schools |
|-----------|--------|-----------|---------|
| 315       | 106    | 73        | 197     |

**10. Recruitment – in response to a question whether there was any cost to the Council in taking the senior officer recruitment in house the Portfolio Holder undertook to confirm this in writing.**

There was no hiring of additional staff to run this campaign, the Chief Organisation Culture Officer lead the recruitment along with the Head of Recruitment and the Senior Recruitment Officer, this exercise was supported by Democratic services and partners.

**Lead Officer Contact:** Phil Watts, Chief Operating Officer, Finance and Business Improvement