

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR RESOURCES – 6th October 2016

COUNCILLOR ANDY KAY

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICER: DENISE PARK**

Finance

Year End 2015-16 – The accounts were successfully closed on time and the external auditors have been reviewing the Council's accounts. The Audit Findings report identified no material misstatements that would require any adjustment to the financial statements, and Grant Thornton are expecting to issue an unqualified audit opinion to the accounts. At Audit Committee, Grant Thornton also acknowledged the scale of the financial challenge facing the Council, adding that, although funding has been significantly cut and the Council has to continue to make difficult decisions, we do have a plan and through our monitoring we will know where we're at in terms of delivery against the plan.

New Finance Management Information System

The Finance team, supported by colleagues from IT are in the process of procuring a new Financial Management Information system for the Council. The introduction of a new system will create significant efficiencies in working practices and costs and will contribute to the Council's savings programme.

Council Tax, Housing Benefits and Business Rates

- Benefits

To improve the on-line options for landlords, the Benefits team is introducing a 'Housing Benefit landlord portal' in early October which will enable those landlords who receive direct payments to self-serve any enquiry for Housing Benefit claims and payments. This module will free up a significant amount of officer time and assist with the required budget challenges. All landlords will be contacted and signed up to the portal and during November, production of manual payment schedules will cease.

- Business Rates

To incentivise moving to on-line solutions telephone opening times for Business Rates Customers will be reduced to 10 am – 3 pm from October. From November the telephone service will cease with a move to a fully digitised/on-line service including webchat facilities from the Business Rates website page.

Welfare Cap

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has informed the Council of the initial list of 245 families who will be impacted by the revised Welfare Cap rates. The current cap is £500 per week (£26,000 per year) for couples, and £350 per week (£18,200 per year) for single people. From November the cap will reduce total welfare payments to £384.62 per week (£20,000 a year) for couples, and £257.69 per week (£13,400 a year) for single households.

Contact letters have been issued by the DWP to some of the families affected, the remaining ones will be contacted over the next few weeks.

With effect from 7th November the Council will be instructed to make an appropriate deduction to the Housing Benefit payment for the families identified. Initially those claimants who are already capped will be re-capped at the new lower level. From November 14th and for the following 12 weeks, newly-capped claimants will also be brought into scope.

Discussion are being held with other council departments to share details of the cases that are deemed most vulnerable.

Advice for All service

Shelter, along with a number of partners are now providing advice services from the library. The provision of welfare and debt advice is being offered both through a drop in and appointment basis.

HR

The HR team is continuing to support the major workforce reviews ongoing across all services. The project to implement and deliver full employee self-service utilising the Resourcelink system continues and remains on target for 2017. The department also continues to increase its external HR services offer and has been successful in increasing income to the Council.

Civil Contingencies

Severe Weather/ Flood drop in sessions

Two drop in sessions were planned to assist residents and business to prepare for winter weather and potential flooding. The first was held in Darwen on 7th September 2016 in the evening with the Environment Agency. All residents and business users were written to directly, but the actual attendance on the evening was disappointing although well attended by Members. The second event took place at Mill Hill Community Centre on 13th September 2016, again in partnership with the Environment Agency. Members of the public (x5) attended this meeting; 1 from a local business at real risk of flooding and requiring “business continuity” advice and infrastructure/drainage advice (which is being provided); the other attendees were residents seeking flood prevention advice and guidance. An invitation was received to talk at a Community Group AGM which is also being followed up.

Business Continuity Response and Planning

Recently the Council experienced two ICT outages impacting on the Council’s business continuity. The first caused by an external contractor was on the 23rd June 2016 (EU referendum day) which impacted all of the Council’s services. The Corporate Business continuity plan was activated by the Civil Contingencies Manager and with support from our network partners the full services were successfully back up and running by later that afternoon. This was a significant test of, and good outcome for, our Business Continuity response with particular mention for all those involved across services on the day. A number of actions had already been implemented by the time the second event occurred on the 22nd August 2016. Again this was effectively responded to by all departments and the Business continuity plan put in place meant services were disrupted for only a short time. A debrief will take place later this month to identify further areas for improvement and good practice.

Community Risk Register Workshop

The Civil Contingencies Service is hosting a workshop in November 2016 to progress identification of risk and potential hazards in the community as prescribed under the Civil Contingencies act 2004. This will be a multi-agency workshop with officers from a number of internal services, police, fire, ambulance and health officers including Lancashire County Council. The product of this workshop will enable the Council to undertake gap analysis in planning and preparing for response to emergencies and staff awareness.