

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR RESOURCES – 25th January 2018

COUNCILLOR ANDY KAY

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

Benefits

The Benefits Team continue to work closely with staff from the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) in preparation for the 'full' service roll out of Universal Credit. It has been confirmed that Blackburn with Darwen's date will be the 14th February 2018.

Following a full review of roll out in other areas, it has been agreed that two Customer Service staff will be co-located in the DWP office, along with resources from Shelter. The co-location will provide support for those claimants with no digital skills and provide for more effective signposting to other Council services. Shelter will also work closely with the DWP to address debt, housing and welfare issues that arise from Universal Credit.

Council Tax and Business Rates

It was previously reported to Council Forum that the Council Tax and Business Rates Teams would be adopting the use of bankruptcy proceedings against companies and individuals who have large unpaid arrears. In the last few months the new approach has enabled the council to collect or resolve arrears of £504,620.

Following a review of the processes applied and outcomes of those cases that have been progressed through to bankruptcy proceedings, it has been agreed that further cases will be selected and processed accordingly.

Digital

The Digital Board and dedicated Digital Task Team (DTT) have continued to review individual service areas within the Council. These reviews have enabled digital baselines to be developed and documented and digital roadmaps produced for each service reviewed, against which future progress can be measured.

Both the 'website' and the 'digital borough' workstreams have continued to review key aspects of the programme. The website workstream has now fully reviewed the current website and considered the development options available in order to produce a business case for consideration.

The team working on the 'digital borough' have now modelled the digital facilities and support available across the borough from the public, voluntary and business sectors. The next phase will look to identify gaps in provision, and how this information can be shared and communicated across organisations and with citizens.

IT

IT continue to implement new and upgraded systems to deliver improved services and efficiencies including a new Leisure Management System, a new ticketing system for King George's Hall and Darwen Library Theatre, digitisation of Registrars on-line, Planning Services, Property Management and Revenues and Benefits, with other system implementations in the early stages of development including a new Legal Case Management system and implementation of a new Pennine Lancashire Building Control system.

Work is also continuing on the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which takes effect in May 2018 and sets out clear guidelines on how EU citizen data is handled and on the ownership rights of each citizen over their data.

HR & Apprentices Update

The team reports another successful year delivering HR services to schools and focus on continuous improvement to customers internally and externally. Further self-service functionality via the HR system will be introduced for managers across the Council as will the final stages of the transition to one monthly payroll for all Council employees by February 2018. This completes a programme of efficiency changes which has resulted in savings for the council.

The annual apprenticeship recruitment has been a success again this year with 17 new apprentices in post. HR continue to monitor the use of the apprentice levy to ensure the Council can maximise the opportunities for employees.

Governance & Democracy

Democratic Services are working towards putting in place arrangements for the 'new Council' in May 2018 and the team will be focusing on the administration for the "all out" elections. To date electoral canvass and registration has been undertaken and the electoral register of the existing wards and boundaries was published on 1 December 2017. The Blackburn with Darwen (Electoral Changes) Order 2017 was made by Parliament on 13 December 2017. Work is now being undertaken for the preparation of the new electoral register based on the new ward and boundaries created by the Order, and will be published on 1 February 2018.

Complaints are now managed in one service, and we have seen a 35% reduction in complaints escalating to the Ombudsman this last year compared to 2016. The Council has received no decisions of maladministration that has led to a full report being issued against us. We have also overturned two decisions of 'fault' by successfully challenging the Ombudsman and their investigations.

Legal Services

The Coroner areas of Preston and West Lancashire, East Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen formally merged on 1st December 2017. Known as Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen, the new jurisdiction will be led by Dr James Adeley as the Senior Coroner, supported by Mr Richard Taylor and Mr James Newman as Area Coroners. The merger follows a formal consultation period by the Ministry of Justice during August and September this year, and will see the jurisdiction dealing with approximately 4,500 deaths per year.

As well as saving costs the amalgamation will provide opportunities to improve the service to bereaved families including the introduction of CT post-mortem examinations rather than traditional autopsies and the larger size of jurisdiction will also allow the majority of Lancashire to be better prepared to deal with larger incidents.

On 11th December 2017 following a prosecution by the Council at Preston Crown Court Derek Bradshaw received 19 months imprisonment for three offences of participating in a fraudulent business, contrary to section 9 of the Fraud Act 2006 to which he pleaded guilty. The Council previously prosecuted this defendant as a result of which on 6th March 2015 he was sentenced for fraud and obtaining credit as a bankrupt in connection with building work for members of the public. In short he pleaded guilty to taking £36-38,000 from home owners to do building work, made a start but never finished the work. He was sentenced to 27 Months custody for the first count and 12 months concurrent for the second.