

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

1st October 2020

COUNCILLOR VICKY McGURK

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: LOUISE MATTINSON

People: A good quality of life for all our residents

Council Tax

Following the initial 3 month deferral of payments in the first quarter of the year, the last 2 months has seen the continuation of reminder notices being issued. In addition, the Council Tax team have been proactively contacting customers who are showing as being in arrears, with all interactions both promoting payment and looking to identify financial difficulty. In September, a full review of all single person discounts has commenced, with a view to reducing potential fraud and error in respect of the 21,150 single person discounts currently awarded within the borough.

Benefits

Incoming work is still stable although as stated previously we are monitoring on a weekly basis as we anticipate another increase in the near future.

From the 2nd September 2020 the Benefits Team is responsible for administering the new Financial support scheme for those customers who are self-isolating. This is a pilot scheme which includes Blackburn with Darwen, Pendle and Oldham.

For those that qualify, a payment of £13 per day for the period of isolation, per person, will be made available to eligible individuals. This funding amount is set and funded by the Government.

Business Rates

Administration of the Government's Business Rate Grant Scheme for eligible businesses in the borough has been a significant piece of work for the team. In total, 3711 grants have been paid, totalling £40,800,000. The Grant application window has now closed but there are a small number of grants awaiting processing and these will be done by the end of September.

All businesses entitled to the Expanded Retail Business Rate Relief have also received their new bill for the financial year 2020/21.

In line with the Council Tax team, Business Rates have also recommenced recovery action and issued several hundred reminder notices.

Registrars

Death documentation continues to be received electronically and the registration continues to take place over the telephone. Following registration, with the exception of the death certificate, all relevant documents are electronically sent to the informant and funeral authority.

To limit face to face contact birth registrations now follow a two stage process – parents are contacted by telephone to give the required information to the Registrar, and then the parent(s) are required to attend the Registrar's Office to check and sign the register page.

All Notices of marriage/ civil partnership are being taken through face to face appointments in the Northgate Suite – due to the current high volume of requests, appointments can only be made for ceremonies taking place within the next three months.

Marriage / civil partnership ceremonies are now taking place in the Northgate Suite and in Covid-19 secure approved premises within the borough – the maximum number of attendees is 30, which includes the registration officials, the couple, photographers etc, and guests. All attendees, apart from the couple, must wear a face covering to reduce risk and, following government guidance, the content of all ceremonies is kept to the legally required minimum.

Citizenship ceremonies are now being conducted virtually via Microsoft teams, unless the attendee is unable to access the system when a one to one face to face ceremony will take place.

Copy certificates are still only being issued to the public in an emergency or exceptional circumstances, with customers being directed to the General Register Office (GRO) for any requests. To avoid additional costs charged by the GRO to the authority, the service now issues certificates internally.

The service continues to receive a high volume of requests for ceremony cancellations, re-arrangements and new bookings.

Council: Delivered by a strong and resilient council

Financial Services

External audit are continuing their annual review of the 2019/20 statutory accounts. The timescale for completion of the audit is the end of October; no issues have been reported to date. MHCLG have now extended the deadline for publication of final, audited accounts for all local authority bodies to 30th November 2020, due to the COVID 19 crisis.

The team have now submitted the Sales, Fees and Charges Income Loss claim form to government to try and recoup some of the significant income losses that the Council has suffered as a result of the COVID crisis.

Audit & Assurance

The Audit & Assurance team have continued to deliver against the 2020/21 Annual Audit Plan. A Progress Report will be presented to the next Audit & Governance Committee, to be held in November. This will provide Members with a progress update on the plan, including details of the outcomes from internal audit reviews completed to the end of September, and a commentary on the counter fraud work undertaken during the period. This has included work to support staff in other teams in their administration of the Small Business, Retail, Leisure and Hospitality, and Discretionary Grant Funds.

The Committee will also receive a Risk Management Report setting out the risk management activity undertaken in the period, along with a summary update of the corporate risks at the end of September.

Contracts & Procurement

The Contracts and Procurement team have continued managing the logistical and distribution arrangements for the Council's supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), ensuring Council services, care providers and local schools have the PPE that they need.

In addition the team have also worked with colleagues across the Council to source the necessary equipment for buildings to re-open in a Covid secure way.

The team have also been progressing a number of other 'business as usual' procurements, including various contracts for works on schools, resurfacing of carriageways, highways materials and home to school transport.

HR, Legal & Governance

As set out elsewhere on this agenda the HR, Legal & Governance Team have been supporting the response to the Covid-19 Pandemic. This has included important activity in support of Health and Wellbeing of Employees and Schools, risk assessments of buildings, updating advice and guidance for employees, operational and strategic support to the Lancashire Resilience Forum (LRF) and ensuring the Council's legal obligations in support of Statutory Services continue to be met and facilitating effective and continued local democracy.

Legal Services

In particular the team has provided legal advice and support during the summer to the Public Health and Public Protection teams in relation to enforcement related to Covid-19, to try and ensure that residents can have confidence and feel safe living and working in Blackburn with Darwen during these difficult times.

Governance Services

A restructure of these services to deliver a revised and improved delivery model whilst also delivering budget savings required as part of the 2020/21 budget savings programme has been delivered over the summer and revised services commenced on 1st October 2020.

Services to Schools

The HR service continues to grow its services to schools, with 5 more schools purchasing services for the first time from September and with an increase of 15 schools purchasing HR consultancy services. We also now provide services for our first Academy school.

Sickness Absence

HR staff have been working with Assistant Executive Members to review our approach to managing sickness absence. An action plan is being put together to address a number of key recommendations to continue to proactively address the causes of sickness absence and assure its effective management.

2020 Pay Award

A pay award of 2.75% has been agreed and the new pay rates have been paid in September salaries. This includes all Council employees i.e. Green Book, Soulbury, Chief Officers and Chief Executive.

Apprentices

We have had another successful round of apprentice recruitment with 20 apprentices across a range of roles starting in September 2020.

Training & Development

The HR service has continued to develop a range of on-line training to support employees whilst working remotely. Face to face training has been able to start again from 28th September, 2020 where essential qualification training such as first aid training is being prioritised.