

# REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

28<sup>th</sup> January 2021

COUNCILLOR VICKY McGURK

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: LOUISE MATTINSON  
DAVID FAIRCLOUGH

## **People: A good quality of life for all our residents**

### **Revenues and Benefits**

The Council Tax and Business Rate teams have continued to administer recovery action in a responsible and proportionate way throughout the pandemic. During the first and second national lockdowns, the Council's approach has been to seek to engage with customers before taking action. In many cases this approach has resulted in a re-profiling of individual debts and an agreement to collect arrears over a longer period, as well as the opportunity to provide assistance by signposting individuals to the debt, welfare and housing support offered by Shelter. Whilst there has been a drop in the overall collection rates, it is hoped that a large proportion of this debt will be recouped over the next few months.

The Business Rates team has also been responsible for the administration of the Small Business Grants and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants in the earlier part of the pandemic. Over 3,700 grants were made to businesses totalling over £40m.

Further grants have also been made available by the Government to cover the period when restrictions were in place for businesses from 1<sup>st</sup> August. These grants are aimed in the main at the Hospitality, Leisure and Accommodation sectors. At the start of December, over 900 grants had been made totalling £1.3m.

In order to support the businesses as much as possible, the team is currently contacting all those businesses who it is felt may be eligible for the grants but have not yet applied.

Grants will continue to be administered whilst the Council is in either Tier 2, Tier 3 or national lockdown restrictions.

The Benefits team continues to perform exceptionally well despite a reallocation of resources to assist in the administration of the Test and Trace Support payments, and in the increases in the number of residents claiming benefits. New claims continue to be assessed in less than 9 days and 'changes to circumstances' in less than 5 days.

A total of 6 full time equivalent staff have been allocated to support the administration of the new Test and Trace Support payments. The volume of applications has been extremely high with approximately 2,000 received by the start of December, resulting in payments of over £290,000 to eligible applicants.

### **Advice Services**

Due to the uncertainty of the pandemic with regards to the length of time it will persist, its impact and the increased number of residents seeking help with welfare entitlement, debt and housing, it has been agreed that the current contract period for welfare, benefit and debt advice services will be extended by a further 12 months. It is hoped that this will provide stability for the residents of the borough as the economic impacts become known.

## **Council: Delivered by a strong and resilient council**

### **Financial Services**

The team continues to work on the financial monitoring returns required by Government in relation to increased expenditure and losses in income due to the pandemic.

Work continues on development of the Budget Strategy for 2021-22, following the issue of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement by Government on 17<sup>th</sup> December; work is ongoing with Management Board and Executive Members to prepare a balanced budget for submission to Finance Council for approval on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021.

### **Audit & Assurance and Insurance**

The Audit & Assurance Team has continued its work to deliver the 2020/21 internal audit plan. The team reported its progress to the Audit & Governance Committee meeting on 12th January 2021.

The Committee also received an update on the progress to date of the actions being taken to address the three significant issues identified in the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement as well as a report on the risk management activity in the period, which included a copy of the Corporate Risk Register as at 30 September.

### **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

The Contracts and Procurement team has continued to support internal Council services and local Care homes and Care providers with supplies of PPE.

The team completed the sale of the Council's minority holdings in the Building Schools for the Future PFI companies in October 2020.

The team has supported a range of procurement activity working with colleagues across the Council including:

- Building materials
- Resurfacing of highways
- Grass cutting
- A dynamic purchasing system of consultants to support the work of Growth Lancashire
- a new HR and Payroll IT system
- Furniture and works related to the refurbishment of the Town Hall

### **HR Services Including Resilience & Emergency Planning**

The service has supported the response to Covid-19, particularly by addressing any health, safety & wellbeing activity to support the response to the pandemic. In addition key staff have been deployed to directly support the response to the pandemic and prepare for all aspects of Winter planning

The service continues to prioritise the reduction in sickness absence and develop initiatives to promote wellbeing.

More detailed MI reports continue to be developed using Power BI, to support the organisation in workforce planning and decision making.

The current contract for the Council's HR & payroll system expires on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 and therefore we are currently undertaking an exercise to procure a new cloud base solution.

### **Legal Services**

Legal Services has been at the forefront of providing legal advice and guidance in relation to the constantly changing Covid-19 health protection legislation and guidance. In particular, Legal Services supported other teams in the council in relation to understanding and responding to compliance issues and residents' concerns/queries relating to second lockdown and Tier restrictions. Legal Services also lead the Lancashire LRF Legal Group ensuring comprehensive and consistent advice across Lancashire, and also provide legal support to the LRF Business Compliance Group.

### **Governance Services**

Following the annual electoral canvass, implementing the new process for confirming electoral registration the Governance team have commenced preparations for the combined elections in May 2021. To date, this has included assessing the polling stations in view of the current health protection guidance, ordering equipment and preliminary staffing arrangements for polling stations and the counts. The team has also been supporting the Chief Executive (as the PARO for the Lancashire PCC election) with preparing and issuing joint Directions to the Lancashire Returning Officers, and coordinating with their election teams. The team are also liaising with the wider North West election managers group and the Electoral Commission on additional requirements for elections in May 2021.