

# REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

25<sup>th</sup> March 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

#### **Business Rates**

The Business Rates team continues to administer the Local Restriction Support Grant scheme on behalf of the government and has now paid all eligible businesses until the 31st March 2021. Since the start of COVID, the team has distributed approximately 12,000 grants, totalling over £59m to the business community of the borough.

Further grants have been announced in the budget which are intended to 'restart' businesses as the restriction measures are lifted. As these will relate to businesses who have already received grants, the council will contact them directly, as such, there is no need for members to promote the new grants or ask individuals to make applications.

The budget also announced the extension of the business rate exemption for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. This extension will be for April to June, after which businesses will receive 66% relief until the end of the financial year. Due to the lateness of this announcement, the council has not been able to issue bills reflecting the change and will therefore be required to rebill all those businesses affected by the exemption extension as soon as possible. A letter will be included in the annual bills explaining the situation to businesses.

Once the initial 3 months exemption of 100% has expired, all eligible businesses will be issued with a further bill outlining the applicable 66% discount for the period 1<sup>st</sup> July 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, and the instalments that are required to be paid.

#### **Council tax**

The recovery process for Council Tax arrears has been severely impacted this financial year, with the first summonses for non-payment only issued in January 2021. Whilst this has provided a boost to collection, it is expected that the level of arrears will be higher at the 31st March 2021 compared to last year.

#### **Benefits**

After a period of significant increases in Council Tax Support applications, the caseload has stabilised over the last two months. Whilst the reduction is welcomed, it is expected that increases will recommence in summer as furlough and other support packages to businesses end.

The delivery of the Test and Trace self-isolation support payments has resulted in a huge strain on the resources in the benefits service. Approximately 3,900 applications have been received, with a further 1,500 emails to customers being answered (up to the end of February). The government has now extended the scheme until the 30th June and amended the criteria to include parents and guardians of children asked to stay at home following outbreaks at school.

### **Advice Services**

In advance of the current contract ending in 2022, work has commenced to review the existing specification with a view to designing a modern service that delivers on key objectives of the council. This work will continue through the summer and involve all departments within the council.

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

### **Financial Services**

The team have completed the budget setting process for 2021/22 and are now preparing for year-end closure of the accounts for 2020/21. Finance Managers are working with Directors across each of the portfolios to determine the impact of COVID on the final outturn positions, and the overall position for the Council as a whole.

The final COVID expenditure and income loss return for 2020/21 financial year is being prepared, this will be reviewed and verified by Government against the authority's financial ledger.

### **Audit & Assurance**

Progress in delivering the 2020/21 Annual Audit Plan will be reported to the March Audit & Governance Committee meeting. The report will summarise the internal audit outcomes achieved to the end of February. It will also include an update on the progress of work to follow up the data matches highlighted from the latest National Fraud Initiative exercise, led by the Cabinet Office. In addition, the draft 2021/22 annual internal audit plan will be presented for approval. The plan sets out the work that the Audit & Assurance Team will carry out during 2021/22 to support the Section 151 Officer's statutory obligations to maintain an adequate and effective internal audit of the Council's accounting records and systems of internal control, governance and risk management.

A report will also be presented for consideration setting out the results of the assessment of the effectiveness of the Committee against the CIPFA best practice guidance for Audit Committees.

### **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

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.

The team have also been progressing a number of other 'business as usual' procurements, including various contracts for a new HR and Payroll IT system, grass cutting, drainage works, highways materials, and renovation works on Darwen Tower.

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

The Service is in the process of procuring a new HR & payroll system to replace the existing system which is end of contract.

The HR service continues to develop its services to schools and all schools have either renewed their existing SLAS or purchased additional services for 2021/22. The Service

is also continuing to improve relationships within the Education sector and is working closely with Education Department colleagues to support school improvement.

The HR and Resilience & Emergency planning teams continue to provide support to the response to COVID, working with key leads across the Council to ensure the response can focus on a transition into recovery. The team are providing increased support on health and safety advice, which is being provided internally, and externally. Appropriate advice and support to employees shielding and dealing with health and wellbeing issues as a result of COVID is also being given.

The HR team are supporting the core team in respect of COVID to ensure that an appropriate resource plan is in place for the next 12 months to enable the Council to transition into delivering key priorities whilst acknowledging the need to continue providing a response and recovery plan for COVID 19, which links to the government's latest road map.

The Service have also produced and published the Equality Watch Report.

### **Legal & Governance Services**

The team continues to support the legal work associated with the pandemic whilst maintaining ongoing legal matters.

The Governance team is continuing to make detailed plans and arrangements for the delivery of the Blackburn with Darwen Council elections, town and Parish elections and the elections for the Police and Crime Commissioner. These elections are taking place whilst restrictions due to the pandemic will be in place and therefore there will be some significant changes to the operation of polling stations and the count in order to assure health and safety of all concerned, candidates, public and elections officers.

The Government's published roadmap out of lockdown means that Committee meetings will currently be unable to commence in person until at least 21st June 2021. The Local Government Association are currently pressing the Government to extend the provisions in the regulations for continuing to hold public meetings remotely after 6th May 2021. Members will be kept informed of developments on this issue.