

# REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

## 27<sup>th</sup> July 2021

COUNCILLOR VICKY McGURK

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: DAVID FAIRCLOUGH

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

#### **Revenues and Benefits**

##### **Business Rates**

In line with Government policy, the payment of Business Rate grants ceased on the 30th June, as a consequence, no further application can now be considered. The focus for the team has now moved to the preparation for the Discretionary Covid relief scheme. This scheme will be applicable to businesses that have not been granted the Expanded Retail Discount, but detrimentally affected by the pandemic and the restrictions.

It is expected that the Government will be issuing guidance for Local Authorities shortly. Once received, the council will be able to review the guidance and design a discretionary scheme that best meets the needs of the borough.

Those businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors that received the Expanded Retail Discount have seen a reduction in the discount from 100% to 66% with effect from 1st July 2021. The rebilling of the businesses is complete and the Business Rates team is now monitoring customer reaction and payments closely.

##### **Council tax**

The recovery of unpaid Council Tax is well underway with significant numbers of notices being issued to customers. It is expected to be a very difficult year in respect of the collection of arrears. The approach by the Council Tax team will be to support customers where possible, but also ensuring that the recovery documents are issued promptly and collection is maximised.

##### **Benefits**

Following the end of the Brexit transition period, all EU, Swiss, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein nationals were given until 30th June 2021 to apply for the Government's European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS) to protect their rights on healthcare, education, pensions and welfare benefits.

Now that this period has ended, the Benefits team is waiting to be notified of those individuals/families who have not applied. All residents who fall into this category will have any Department of Work and Pensions welfare benefit and Council Tax Support entitlement cancelled. At present there is no indication on the number of cases this may affect.

In addition to the work undertaken by Home Office and Department of Work and Pensions to promote the scheme, support for residents locally has been led by Shelter, who partnered with Migration Help to assist EU nationals with the registration of the scheme. It is hoped that with this additional support, the number of non-registered cases in BwD will be relatively low.

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

#### **Financial Services**

The team are now preparing year-end closure of the accounts and the final outturn 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 has been prepared, this will be reviewed and verified by Government against the authority's financial ledger.

## **Audit & Assurance**

Progress in delivering the 2021/22 Annual Audit Plan was reported to the Audit & Governance Committee meeting on 29th June. The report summarised the internal audit outcomes achieved to the end of May, including 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 June Committee received the 2020/21 Head of Audit Annual Internal Audit Opinion, and the annual Risk Management and Counter Fraud Reports for consideration. The detail within these reports helps to inform the draft 2020/21 Annual Governance Statement, which the Committee also considered, to enable it to be satisfied that the Statement properly reflected the governance and control arrangements in place within the Council during 2020/21. It was then signed by the Leader and Chief Executive and will be included in the Council's 2020/21 Statement of Accounts.

The Committee also agreed its annual report at this meeting, which was prepared on its behalf by the Head of Audit & Assurance. This summarises the work undertaken and reports considered by the Committee during 2020/21, to demonstrate that it has fulfilled its agreed terms of reference effectively.

## **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

The Contracts and Procurement team have been working on the development of a new Social Value policy for Council procurement activity and are liaising with departments on various aspects of this.

The team has been involved in a variety of tenders and procurement exercises including for gully cleaning, highway resurfacing, school refurbishment works and a number of projects linked to the decarbonisation programme.

The team continues to support the provision of PPE to Council teams, suppliers and organisations in the borough to support the response to Covid 19.

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

The Service has now established the project team to implement the new HR & Payroll system – MHR's iTrent, with a proposed Go live date of November 2021 for phase 1. This is a joint project supported by Digital & Business Change. Departments have been asked to minimise workforce changes from August 21 to November 21 to allow the HR & Payroll teams to complete user acceptance testing and parallel running and become upskilled to use the new system. A communications & training plan has been developed to ensure all users are fully aware of the new system and are able to fully utilise the functionality

The HR and Resilience & Emergency planning teams continue to provide support to the response to COVID, working with key leads across the Council to support the recovery. Additional capacity has been recruited to with the core team continuing to work with colleagues across the department and wider organisation to support the continued recovery. The implications of long Covid are a focus for the service.

There is an investment in leadership & management development with 2 programmes being commissioned with the North West Employers Organisation for Service leads and aspiring leaders. This will be further enhanced with leadership & management training at all levels across the organisation. Funding has also been secured from the LGA to undertake work with us on workforce planning.

## **Legal & Governance Services**

The Governance team assisted in the successful delivery of the Blackburn with Darwen Council elections, town and Parish elections and the election for the Police and Crime Commissioner, which this year required additional organisation and planning to ensure the health & safety of all

concerned and to reflect the Covid-19 restrictions that were in place. The Governance team are now planning for the annual canvass and registration, which will commence soon.

Legal Services have been complimented for their hard work in putting in a large number of waste cases through the courts during a pandemic when the courts were not accepting as many cases. Up to the end of March, the legal team handled 49 waste prosecutions, despite a sustained period of suspension to court services due to the pandemic reminding anyone who continues to create problems for residents of the Borough can be advised that we will take action.