

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE
7th October 2021

COUNCILLOR VICKY McGURK

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: Dean Langton

People: A good quality of life for all our residents

Revenues and Benefits

Business Rates

Business Rates team is still awaiting the government guidance and financial allocation for the government's new Discretionary Covid relief. This relief is aimed at companies that have not benefited from the targeted support to the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality sector, but have still suffered from the effects of the pandemic.

A recent update from the MHCLG has suggested that it might be as late as December before the final details and financial allocation is known. Once this information is received, the council will be able to review the guidance and design a discretionary scheme that best meets the needs of the borough.

Benefits - Supported Accommodation

The pilot undertaken in conjunction with the MHCLG to review short-term non-commissioned supported accommodation in the borough will be completed in the next few weeks. The work over the last 10 months has been extensive and has included the inspection of properties, consultation with residents, assessment of support and engagement with providers.

During October and November, the MHCLG will review the findings of all 5 pilot authorities and agree the roll out of best practice across all Local Authorities in the country. In addition to the national guidelines, the council is also reviewing the work of the pilot and considering what improvements can be made to its own governance and monitoring model for supported accommodation.

Council Tax Collection Rate

	As at end of August 2021
Collection to date	44.10%
Collection target	44.54%
Difference	-0.44

Business Rates Collection Rate

	As at end of August 2021
Collection to date	44.05%*
Collection in 2020	36.23%
Collection in 2021	47.81%

*Due to 100% discount for all retail, leisure and hospitality businesses for the period 1st April to 30th June and then a reduction to a 66% discount from July to the end of March it is very difficult to make comparisons to previous years.

Council: Delivered by a strong and resilient council

Financial Services

The Team is currently working with our external auditors Grant Thornton on the audit of the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts and the Council's arrangements for value for money.

Work is ongoing to track and support COVID related expenditure and income losses and complete financial COVID returns for Government.

In addition to the above, the team is focussed on in-year budget monitoring and developing the Financial Strategy and Medium Term Financial Plan for 2022/23 and beyond.

Audit & Assurance

Audit & Assurance have continued with the delivery of the 2021/22 Annual Audit Plan. A Progress Report will be presented to the Audit & Governance Committee meeting on 26 October. This will provide Members with details of the outcomes from internal audit reviews completed to the end of September, and a commentary on any counter fraud work undertaken in the period since the last report. The report will also update the Members on the outcome of the peer review that assessed conformance of Internal Audit (IA) with the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS). The review concluded that IA conforms with the PSIAS overall and for each of the sub sections.

This means that, in their judgement, the internal audit service complies with all fundamental elements of the PSIAS and the individual statements of good practice in all material respects. This is the highest opinion that can be given from the review process

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

Corporate Procurement and Contracts

Contracts and Procurement team have been working on a variety of tenders including for gully cleaning, waste analysis, CCTV upgrade, restoration of Blakey Moor Terrace and a variety of projects that aimed at assisting the borough to become carbon neutral.

Work has also started to update the Council's Procurement Strategy.

HR & Payroll System Implementation

The core system has been built and user acceptance testing has been carried out during September 2021 to ensure there is the full functionality to meet the needs of the organisation and our customers and meets all GDPR requirements. Planning for parallel runs is now in place along with preparing for the build of the new modules as part of phase 2.

The Council has invested in additional resources to support leadership & management development and workforce planning. The team are working closely with corporate leadership team to ensure we have workforce plans in place to respond to emerging issues for the organisations and be able to recruit, retain and develop our employees to meet our organisational priorities and make a full recovery from the impact of Covid- 19.

Legal & Governance Services

There has been a backlog of cases in the Court system which are now starting to be cleared. The Litigation team are now covering an increased number of cases and over past few months the team have had four contested trials at the Magistrates Court in respect of fly-tipping related offences within Blackburn with Darwen. The defendants were found guilty in each case, and the Council were awarded Costs and compensation of over £2500 in respect of these four cases alone. The defendants also had additional financial penalties to pay to the Court.

The Legal Adults Social Care team is actively working on a total of 136 Court cases, primarily in the Court of Protection - 39 contentious welfare/coroner cases, 58 Deputyship Cases and 42 deprivation of liberty cases as well as approximately 120 live ASC advice cases.

The Governance team are continuing to work on the electoral registration update/annual canvass, and have arranged home visits to over 7300 properties across Blackburn with Darwen. This is required for the new electoral register due to be published on 1 December 2021.