

## **REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**

**COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK**

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICER: Director of Finance,  
Dean Langton, Thursday, 24 March  
2022**

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

#### **Revenues and Benefits**

##### **Business Rates**

The main focus for the Business Rates team is the preparation and completion of the annual billing process. This year again has changes to the amount many businesses will pay, particularly in respect of the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

In addition to annual billing work, the team continues to contact and support businesses with the new Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant. This grant has been aimed at hospitality, leisure and accommodation businesses, in recognition that the Omicron variant would have a direct impact on their ability to operate. All potential qualifying businesses are being contacted by email or letter.

The administration of a new Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) is also underway. This relief looks to assess businesses who have been adversely affected by the Covid pandemic but not previously been eligible for the Extended Retail Discount. The Business Rate team is contacting all potential qualifying businesses advising them of the criteria, and, asking for applications to be made. Once all applications have been received and assessed, a percentage relief will be awarded to the business rates bill of those successful applicants.

##### **Council Tax and Benefits**

The Council Tax team is also preparing for the annual billing of all Council Tax properties in the borough. Whilst the customer response to the issuing of the bills is always very high, it is anticipated that the current cost of living worries may increase the number of calls and visits from customers.

The Government has also announced a series of measures to mitigate the rising cost of energy bills. Whilst very little detail has been made available at the time of writing, included in the measures is a one-off payment of £150 per household to Council Tax payers living in houses that are in tax bands A to D. A discretionary scheme will also operate for those in bands E – H and other eligible residents.

Further details will be issued to members once the Government guidance has been received.

### **COUNCIL: Delivered by a strong and resilient council;**

#### **Financial Services**

Work is continuing alongside External Audit to finalise the 2020-21 statement of accounts, timescales have been impacted by the pandemic but it is anticipated that this work will be finalised imminently. External Audit are also currently undertaking an assessment of the Council's value for money arrangements

Work on the development of the budget for 2022/23 has been completed with the revenue budget 2022-23, the capital programme and the Financial Strategy 2022-2025 presented to Finance Council on the 28 February.

The financial impact of the pandemic continues to be monitored with returns completed monthly to government departments on our additional expenditure, income losses and various grant funding streams such as Contain Outbreak Management Fund etc.

The general impact of the pandemic is that aspects of the normal financial cycle are starting to merge; as indicated above, the sign-off of the Council's Statement of Accounts for 2020/21 is almost complete but this has cut across the work on the development of the Council's Budget for 2022/23. Due to this, preparatory work on the closure of the accounts for 2021/22 has been delayed and whilst it is not expected to impact on the deadline for the production of the draft Statement of Accounts, it will require some intensive work during the first quarter of the new financial year.

### **Audit & Assurance**

Progress in delivering the 2021/22 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 2022/23 annual internal audit and three year strategic plans will be presented for approval. The annual plan sets out the work that the Audit & Assurance Team will carry out during 2022/23 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 and to provide the Head of Audit's Annual Internal Audit Report for 2022/23.

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 been working on a number of tenders with departments including for Security Services, Home to School transport, CCTV staffing, Teams Rooms, IT Equipment, Traffic Management and Litter Enforcement. The team have also supported colleagues in Commissioning and Public Health teams in relation to the evaluation and award of the Substance Misuse contract and advising on plans for the 0-19 contract. Legal officers in the team have been helping to prepare a variety of legal agreements for various matters including grant funding agreements and contracts to support the above matters.

### **HR Services**

The priorities for the service remain focussed on supporting the organisation to recover from Covid – 19, the implementation of the new HR & Payroll system and delivering services to our schools.

The first phase of the system is complete and the implementation will now focus on all end users accessing the system and using its full functionality and implementing additional modules including on boarding, learning, development, performance, case management and health and safety system.

The team are also supporting the delivery of an OD programme, which will focus on four workstreams: culture & values, recruitment & retention, health & wellbeing and leadership & management development.

The service will also support this year's apprentice programme to recruit new candidates for September 2022.

### **Legal & Governance Services**

The Litigation Team conducted a complex prosecution case of the two owners of a business trading as Smak Polski which came about after trading standards officers seized packs of counterfeit and illegally packaged cigarettes with a retail value £177 500. Both defendants were sentenced at Preston Crown Court on 4 February 2022. The owner of Smak Polski, pleaded guilty to nine offences relating to the supply of illicit tobacco, including fraudulent trading. They both received suspended prison sentences of 12 months with requirements to undertake unpaid work and rehabilitation activities. The proceeds of their crimes will be pursued at a later hearing.

The Governance team are making preparations for the local elections on 5 May and the count on 6 May at King Georges Hall. The elections will be for seats on the 17 Blackburn with Darwen wards and 'all out' elections for Eccleshill Parish Council and Yate & Pickup Bank Parish Council. The team are working to the statutory timetable and the Notice of Election will be published on Friday 25 March 2022. The team and the elections preparation work will take place from the 2nd floor, Town Hall, again.

The team have also been implementing the use of the new Audio Visual system in the Council Chamber, with the phased introduction of the microphone, webcasting and voting elements of the new system. The use of the system will continue to be extended for wider use, such as presentations/training, coroner's inquest hearings and 'hybrid' meetings.