

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

**COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK**

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Director of Finance  
Thursday, 28 July 2022**

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

#### **Revenues and Benefits**

##### **Advice Services**

The re-procurement of the Advice Service will be commenced in July 2022. A new specification is currently being developed with colleagues in Public Health. It is anticipated that the tendering exercise will be undertaken during August and September with the award of the contract immediately after.

It is hoped that the new specification will future proof the needs of the residents and provide for a more flexible service moving forward. A new improved governance regime will provide greater insight into the debt, welfare and housing advice needs of the residents of the borough.

##### **Business Rates**

Following the Executive Board's decision on the administration of the COVID Additional Relief Fund (CARF), all eligible businesses will receive reductions in their Business Rate liability in July 2022.

A total of £3,678,533 will be awarded to 384 businesses within the borough via CARF support. All recipients will be contacted via letter to explain the relief, and supplied with a new business rates bill showing the reduction in liability.

##### **Council Tax**

The Council Tax team is continuing to make Council Tax Energy payments to eligible households in the borough. To date, almost all eligible Direct Debit payers have had the £150 credited to their bank accounts with only a few cases requiring further contact to verify details. Letters are continuing to be issued to those who do not pay their Council Tax by Direct Debit. It is hoped that all letters requesting bank details for payment will be completed by the end of June.

If households do not supply bank details by the 18<sup>th</sup> July, the payment will be credited to the person's Council Tax Account thereby reducing their liability for the year. This will ensure that all eligible households get the benefit of the payment in a timely manner.

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

##### **Value for Money Assessment 2020/21**

The Council's External Auditors, Grant Thornton, have completed their assessment of the Council's arrangements for ensuring value for money is delivered for the residents of the Borough. A report on this matter was considered by the Audit and Governance Committee at its meeting in June 2022. In concluding their assessment of the Council's arrangements, the External Auditor stated '*Overall, we are satisfied the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to ensure it manages risks to its oversight in ensuring economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources*'.

## **Financial Services**

The team has been focussed on the closure of the 2021-22 accounts and the resulting outturn position for the Council as a whole which was reported to July Executive Board. This has included preparatory work for the audit of the 2021-22 accounts, with the team working in liaison with our auditors Grant Thornton in mapping out our systems and processes. It should be noted that this work has been inhibited by further work on the closure of the 2020-21 accounts due to a national issue associated with accounting for infrastructure assets. A resolution of this matter is imminent and should allow the Team to undertake the appropriate accounting adjustments leading to the completion of the accounts. These will then be subject to audit before eventually being signed off and the audit of the Council's Financial Statements for 2020/21 being completed.

Quarter one 2022-23 revenue and capital monitoring is now taking place, with the team working alongside managers in each of the portfolios. This will be reported to September Executive Board.

In June, the Executive Board considered a report on the Council's Financial Strategy and an updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for the period to 2025/26. The MTFP shows a forecast budget deficit of c£13m for the period. Acknowledging the challenging financial outlook, the Executive Board resolved amongst other matters to request that Portfolio Holders develop draft proposals to meet the funding gap and that any such proposals be considered by the Executive Board in due course.

## **Audit & Assurance**

Progress in delivering the 2022/23 Annual Audit Plan was reported to the Audit & Governance Committee meeting on 28 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 Committee received the 2021/22 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 2021/22 Annual Governance Statement, which the Committee also considered. These reports provided supporting evidence to enable the Committee to be satisfied that the Statement properly reflected the governance and control arrangements in place within the Council during 2021/22. It was then signed by the Leader and the Chief Executive.

The Statement is a statutory document that explains the processes and procedures in place to enable the Council to carry out its functions effectively. It reports to the Council's stakeholders on how well it has delivered on governance over the course of the previous year and is published alongside the Statement of Accounts.

The Committee also agreed its annual report at this meeting, which was prepared on behalf of the Committee by the Head of Audit & Assurance. This summarised the work undertaken and reports considered by the Committee during 2021/22, to demonstrate that it had fulfilled its agreed terms of reference effectively.

## **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

Following approval of the Procurement Strategy and Social Value Policy by the Executive Board, work has been ongoing on the implementation of the Strategy/Policy. In particular, a Procurement Board is to be established to oversee the implementation of

the Strategy/Policy and a set of key performance indicators is being development to measure outcomes.

The Contracts and Procurement team have been working on a number of tenders with departments including for Special Educational Needs Transport, CCTV Hub staffing, new photocopiers, MFDs, Street Sweepings, Road Surfacing works, Construction of a Prayer Facility at Pleasington Cemetery and works on various school buildings. The team have also supported colleagues in Commissioning and Public Health teams in 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, Payroll and Pensions**

### **HR Services**

This last quarter has continued to focus on the implementation of the HR & Payroll system and the on boarding of eight new schools. We have also led on this year's apprentice intake, as well as appointing new graduates under the LGA's graduate scheme. 489 applications for apprenticeships were received. The team is focussing support to managers at all levels in the organisation on managing absence as well as collaborative work with the OD programme to support recruitment in hard to fill roles.

We are monitoring the pay negotiations and planning for any implications for the Council and Schools.

## **Organisation and workforce developments**

### **Organisational Development (OD)**

An organisational development programme is now well underway reporting to the OD Board. There are 4 work streams namely; Culture & Engagement, Recruitment & Retention, Wellbeing & Leadership and Management Development.

The Council is refreshing the vision, values and behaviours and we are in the process of developing a Managers toolkit and training to support embedding these new values and behaviours. A Leadership Conference took place at the end of May with the top 120 leaders, which will now become an annual event.

A staff awards event will take place at the end of September with nominations now open. New approaches to recruitment and retention are being explored with detailed investigations taking place in areas where we are finding it hard to recruit. Four Leadership & Management programmes are underway delivered by Blackburn College and commissioned through North West Employers and we are developing our own leadership pathway.

Wellbeing initiatives continue to be supported with financial wellbeing becoming a key priority as well as physical and mental wellbeing.

## **Legal & Governance Services**

The Litigation team since 1<sup>st</sup> April this year conducted prosecutions that saw 18 residents prosecuted for various fly-tipping/waste accumulation type offences, which resulted in those residents having to pay a combined total of £11,215.74 in court fines and charges.

[Residents fined over £11,000 for waste crimes | The Shuttle: Blackburn with Darwen Council News](#)

Since 2021 the number of waste prosecutions have increased and during 2021/22 Legal Services Litigation team have conducted 114 prosecutions for waste related offences.

The team have also continued with other prosecutions:

- with 45 new truancy matters allocated and issued at court since 30 March 2022 with final results and figures are still awaited.
- A planning prosecution of a resident who had built a dormer extension without planning permission was prosecuted and fined.
- Proceeds of Crime Act application in respect of recent counterfeit cigarette conviction still ongoing.
- Serious fraudulent trading matter also involving counterfeit cigarettes and tobacco listed at the magistrates court plus a contested noise nuisance prosecutions.

In addition, two appeals against Licensing Sub-Committee decisions have been successfully defended in court, and two more appeals have been received and being dealt with.

The Governance team following the local elections in May have delivered a number of successful activities and events, including the Elections in May, Mayor-Making, Civic Sunday, New Members Induction and Armed Forces Day. The team are now undertaking the annual canvas/electoral registration work to ensure that the electoral register is up-to-date, identifying any residents who are not registered so that they can be encouraged to do so. 12,000 households in the borough have been sent letters, and the Governance team will be monitoring responses and updating details for the new electoral register. The Governance team are also keeping up to date with the changes from the Election Act 2022.