

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Director of Finance  
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### PEOPLE: A good quality of life for all our residents:

#### **Business Rates**

As at the end of November 2022, the collection of business rates was broadly in line with target.

At the Autumn Statement on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2022, the Chancellor announced that the Government would provide a package of measures to support businesses in England, For the 2023/24 financial year the Chancellor announced the following measure:

- A Retail, Hospitality and Leisure (RHL) rate relief scheme which increased the current relief from 50% to 75%;
- A freezing of the business rates multipliers at 49.9p (small business multiplier) and 51.2p (standard multiplier), and;
- A new Supporting Small Business relief scheme to ensure no small business faces a bill increase greater than £50 per month for 2023-24.

It is also worth noting that the revaluation of all business rateable values has been completed and the initial list has been shared with the Council. As with all revaluations, some businesses will see their rateable value increase, whilst others will see it decrease. The Government's Transitional Relief Scheme will cap increases in business rates due to revaluations (in the same way as previous revaluations but without an adjustment for inflation). However, unlike previous Transitional Relief Schemes, the cost of capping increases will be met directly by Government rather than by capping the reduction in business rates where property rateable values have reduced. All rateable values will be confirmed in December with annual bills being issued in March 2023 reflecting the changes.

#### **Council Tax**

As at the end of the November 2022, the collection of Council Tax is 1.3pp above target.

The Government have announced that councils will be asked to administer an Alternative Fuel Payment scheme for households that use fuel other than gas to heat their homes. It is envisaged that residents will make the application via Gov.UK which will centralise as much of the data gathering and validation as possible. The Government will then share applications with Local Authorities whose primary role will be to verify applicants' addresses and to transfer the relevant support to successful applicants. Further details will be shared as they become available.

Also, the Government has provided funding (£406k) towards a scheme for additional Council Tax Support payments (of up to £25) in 2023/24. This scheme is currently being developed and will feature on Council Tax Bills for next year.

#### **Benefits**

The Benefits Service continues to perform well with both speed of processing new claims (for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support) in line with target.

Building on the Supported Housing pilot undertaken in 2020, the Benefits service has now commenced a longer term review and improvement programme that will run for two

and a half years. Working alongside other departments in the council, the programme will target the quality of accommodation, the support offered to residents, and the cost to the public purse.

Progress on the programme will be reported through EMB's.

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

### **Financial Services**

External Audit are currently on site reviewing the draft Statement of Accounts for 2021/22 and the supporting detail held in the Council's financial systems. At the same time, following the introduction of legislation from the Government to deal with the accounting practice for infrastructure assets (which has affected most local authorities in England), the External Auditors are due imminently to give an unqualified opinion on the Council's Statement of Accounts for 2020/21.

The Finance Team are working with Directors and Budget Holders developing the detail behind the Medium Term Financial Plan for the 2023/24 financial year budget. The provisional Local Government Finance was released on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2022 and details of this were reported to the Executive Board earlier this month.

Running alongside this piece of work is the revenue and capital budget monitoring for quarter 3 which will be taken to February Executive Board.

### **Audit & Assurance**

The Audit & Assurance team have continued with the delivery of the 2022/23 Annual Audit Plan. A report on progress against the approved plan was presented to the Audit & Governance Committee meeting on 29 November for consideration. This provided the members with details of the outcomes of the internal audit reviews completed to the end of October, and a commentary on the counter fraud work undertaken in the period since the last report. A further update will be presented to the March Committee meeting.

The Committee also received a report updating the members on the progress to August of the actions being taken to address the significant issues identified in the 2021/22 Annual Governance Statement and the timetable for the production of the 2022/23 Statement. The report noted that whilst the steps taken were appropriate, it was early in the year to be able to fully assess the impact that these would have on the key issues noted in some cases. It also noted that there were still demand and budget pressures which are being monitored and managed by senior managers in the areas concerned. There was also a level of uncertainty with regards to the impact of the planned social care reforms and on-going impact of the cost of living crisis on services and Council budgets.

The Committee also received a report on the risk management activity for the year to 30 September. This provided details of changes in the residual risk scores for three of the strategic risks and noted that three new risks had been added in the period.

The Insurance team is also in the processes of finalising the evaluation of tenders received for the Council insurance long term arrangements which will be in place from 1 April 2023. Support and advice for this exercise is being provided by the Council's insurance broker.

### **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

The Contracts and Procurement team have been supporting a range of procurement activity across the Council including:

- working with the Insurance team on the tendering of the long term insurance arrangements
- two frameworks to help delivery of highways works – one for minor works and another for surfacing works
- the tender for renovations to the Blackburn Museum has been issued in December
- advising the commissioning team on the Domiciliary Care tender
- tender for Debt, Housing and Welfare advice services

The team has also been working to brief officers on the requirements of the Subsidy Control Act.

## **HR Services**

### Organisational Development (OD)

The Organisational Development programme is progressing well and reporting into the OD Board. In Q3, progress has been around the launch of the new values and developing the branding of these values to be used in recruitment and across the organisation. This has been supported by embedding these values through team engagement sessions to develop their own plans. A further pulse survey will be conducted in March 2023 to monitor our progress and with the objective of encouraging more employees to complete this survey.

The 'Listen, Learn, Act' approach has been undertaken to enable our employees to clearly see where feedback has been considered and what actions will take place as a result. In addition to the annual briefing sessions, quarterly briefings will take place online to continue regular engagement and feedback.

There has been a strong focus over the last 3 months on recruitment & retention, with exit and stay interviews taking place. This has helped to plan our approaches to recruitment and has also presented an opportunity to review policies and flexible working arrangements to support retention. We are looking at new and innovative ways to attract people to Blackburn with Darwen, updating our recruitment pages on the website and maximising opportunities with social media.

Four leadership programmes were completed over this period, with a new programme also starting in Environment & Operations. We are evaluating the impact of the different programmes and looking to develop our own internal leadership pathway to ensure all our leaders and managers have the required skills for their roles.

Furthermore, we are also incorporating Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the OD programme and will be publishing the annual Equality Watch report on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2023. We have also embarked on a campaign to encourage all our workforce to provide their personal EDI information, to ensure all our workforce practices are fully inclusive by monitoring the impact of any actions taken.

We continue to improve our workforce data to assist in all aspects of workforce planning.

### HR and Payroll

In this last quarter, the Team have continued to focus on phase one of the HR & Payroll system.

Following a very successful apprenticeship recruitment campaign, 23 apprentices joined BwD on Monday, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2022 along with 2 graduates under the LGA Graduate

Scheme. Since the last report, managers at all levels have attended workshops relating to absence management as driving absence figures continues to be a key focus for the organisation. Further workshops are scheduled to take place in autumn to upskill investigating officers for employee relation cases.

Additionally, we continue to monitor the pay negotiations and are planning for any implications for the Council and Schools.

### **Legal & Governance Services**

The Legal Adults Social Care & Education continues to receive increasing number of cases in relating to Care of Protection (COP) and Deprivation of Liberty (DOL) cases. By the end of Quarter 2 the team were dealing with 164 'live' court matters, which included a number of contentious applications.

Similarly, the Legal Children's Social Care legal team had received an increase in the number of cases. During Quarter 2, care proceedings were initiated in respect of 28 families and the pre-proceedings process was commenced in respect of 21 families. By the end of Quarter 2 the team were dealing with 73 'live' cases before the family court in relation to children.

The Litigation team continue to focus on prosecutions in relation to waste, public protection and school non-attendance. By the end of Quarter 2 the team had dealt with 189 waste prosecution cases. The team has also dealt with a noise nuisance prosecution, which resulted in a fine of £5,000 and £3,000 costs. In addition, the team have been dealing with 4 Taxi Driver appeals against the Licensing Panel's decisions lodged at the Magistrates Court. One appeal has been concluded and the Magistrates agreed with the decision made by the Licensing Sub-Committee, and awarded costs of £300 against the driver.

In relation to the Bus Station High Court case, the trial for the longstanding and complex construction dispute was heard over 10 days at the High Court in July 2022. The Council were defending a claim brought by the initial contractor (Thomas Barnes & Sons) for wrongful termination and monies owed. Various staff from Legal covered the trial. It was a high profile matter which had been reported previously in the media a number of times. After considering expert evidence from a number of construction specialists and submissions from Counsel **the Judge ruled in favour of the Council** – that it was entitled to terminate the contract with the initial contractor and thus no monies were owned by the Council.

The judgement was received in October 2022 and received coverage in a number of publications, including Place North West: [Blackburn wins contractor court battle - Place North West](#). The Council is now seeking to recover its legal costs in defending the matter and also pursue its claim for monies secured under a performance bond provided by the initial contractor.

### Governance

The Governance team managed and administered the Annual Canvass for electoral registration. This included data matching 81% of 61,000 properties in BwD with the data held with the National DWP database, Local Council Tax and Housing Benefit records. This indicates a high level of accuracy for the information and records we hold on our Electoral Register. New Canvassers were engaged at the second stage to go out and door-knock for the non-responding properties (around 8,900). The new electoral register was published on 1 December 2022, in accordance with legislation.

The team also assisted with the planning and delivering the Darwen South Ward By-Elections on 17th November 2022. The team is currently working on the implementation of changes introduced by the Elections Act 2022, which includes the requirement for voter IDs at polling stations. The DLUHC Voter ID Portal goes live on 16<sup>th</sup> January and the team are working closely with the systems providers and DLUHC to test the new system in readiness for the 'go live' date. In addition, the team has started early planning and organisation for the May 2023 local elections in order to prepare for the Voter ID and 'Accessibility in Polling Stations' requirements.