

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Strategic Director  
of Finance & Resources  
Thursday, 23 March 2023

### **RESOURCES: Tackling the budget challenge;**

#### **Revenues and Benefits**

The performance of the Council Tax, Benefit and Business Rates teams is extremely good as we enter the latter part of the year. The collection rates for both Council Tax and Business Rates are ahead of the target, and it is expected that the final outturn figures will continue to be positive.

The preparation and testing of the annual billing of all domestic and commercial properties is also well underway. Included this year is an additional discount for those recipients of Council Tax Support. This discount is a Government scheme and intended to support the most vulnerable with the cost of living increases.

The new Business Rate bills for the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure sectors will also have the benefit of the Governments relief scheme which will allow for a 75% discount (up to a cap of £110,000 per business). Both discounts will be included in the 2023/24 bills which will be issued in mid-March.

#### **Council Tax**

The Government has announced two new schemes to support households who do not have a domestic energy supply contract and who therefore did not receive the previous support from the Government Energy Bill.

1. The Alternative Fuel Payment Alternative Funding scheme. This scheme will provide for a one off payment of £200 for households who use alternative fuel such as oil.
2. The Energy Bill Support Scheme Alternative Funding and will be a one-off support payment of £400. This scheme is aimed at those responsible for paying for energy as part of a service charge, rent or other arrangement.

Individuals will need to apply for these two schemes through the Gov.uk website, with the Local Authority only responsible for making certain checks on applicants and the actual payment into bank accounts. The scheme is fully funded by the Government.

The council is still awaiting the final guidance documents to be issued. The two schemes will be launched on the 27<sup>th</sup> February and run until 31<sup>st</sup> May 2023.

#### **Benefits**

The council's participation in the Government's Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP) commenced in January. The work plan includes the regular inspection of all large HMO properties that provide support to residents; in addition, standards of support will be assessed through engagement with residents and a comprehensive examination of records and case files. As the programme lasts for a period of 27 months, large amounts of information and data will be obtained which will assist the Government with the review of Supported Accommodation regulations.

## **Financial Services**

The Council's budget 2023-24 and Financial Strategy 2022-25 were signed off at Finance Council on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

The team are now working alongside colleagues in all departments, preparing for year end closure of the 2022-23 accounts and the resulting budget outturn positions for both revenue and capital budgets, which will then be reported to Executive Board.

Once the outturn position is finalised completed, preparation of the statement of accounts 2022-23 will commence.

Work is still underway to conclude the audit of the Council's Statement of Accounts in both 2020/21 and 2021/22. The former was delayed due to a national issue associated with the accounting for infrastructure issues; whilst this has been resolved, a further issue to with the accounting for the Mall Lease has arisen which is being reviewed. For the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts, audit work is progressing with no significant issues to report at this time.

## **Audit & Assurance**

Progress in delivering the 2022/23 Internal Audit Plan was reported to the March Audit & Governance Committee meeting. The report summarised the internal audit outcomes achieved to the end of January. It also included an update on the latest National Fraud Initiative exercise, which led by the Cabinet Office. In addition, the draft 2023/24 annual internal audit and two-year strategic audit plans were presented for approval. The annual audit plan sets out the work that the Audit & Assurance Team will carry out during 2023/24 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. The overall outcome of the planned activity will inform the Head of Audit's Annual Audit Opinion and Report for 2023/24 in due course. This is a key report that supports the Annual Governance Statement.

A report was also presented setting out the results of the assessment of the effectiveness of the Committee against the CIPFA best practice guidance for Audit Committees for the members' consideration.

## **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

Procurement team have been working on evaluations for a couple of frameworks for use by the Highways department for Minor Works and for Civils and Surfacing works. In addition the team have been supporting the tender for a new roof for the Blackburn museum. The team have also been considering options for new janitorial supplies contracts and for home to school transport and SEN transport.

The legal section of the team have also been advising on changes brought in by the Subsidy Control Act and briefing departments on these changes.

Work on the implementation of the Procurement Strategy and the Social Value Policy continues. An update on this will be provided to the Executive Board in due course.

## **Organisational Development (OD)**

Confirmation regarding continued investment in the OD programme is expected soon, which will shape our workforce priorities over the next 12 months. A Learning Hub is being developed and also a leadership pathway, to provide development opportunities for employees at all levels. There will be a strong focus on diversity & inclusion, which includes increasing the quality of data, so we fully understand our workforce, and also

ensuring all employees undertake equality training. We are developing staff networks, so these networks can inform policy and service developments. The annual equality watch report was published on 31st January 2023.

### **Apprenticeships**

We are currently in the Apprenticeship window and following applications being submitted for corporate funding, a decision was made to corporately fund 20 apprentices to join the Organisation from 1 September 2023. A further 5 opportunities are to be paid for from departmental budgets.

A very well attended Apprenticeship Event was held on Wednesday, 22 February 2023 where managers showcased their roles and chatted first hand with many people who were interested in learning more about working for the Council. As at 28 February, 109 applications have been received though the closing date is still a number of days away (17 March 2023). It was interesting to learn that many of those attending on the evening were enquiring about trade linked roles such as electricians and plumbers. This ties in with previous years where high number of applications were submitted for those types of roles.

### **Recruitment Training**

We are also currently working with managers across the Organisation developing their skills in recruitment training. All managers with recruitment responsibilities are expected to attend with a vision that going forward only those who have attended the mandatory training will be able to sit on Recruitment Panels. To date a total of 81 managers have been upskilled with a further 114 booked on future sessions. More promotion of available dates is in the pipeline too.

### **Legal & Governance Services**

The Legal Children's Social Care team continue to be busy with a 33.3% increase of care applications, compared to last year. Pre-proceedings numbers have also seen a 19% increase. As can be expected the team work very closely with Children's social care to use very best endeavours to divert families away from the Court process and there has been a good degree of successful outcomes from our pre-proceedings work. The team will soon be involved on peer review with our PAN Lancashire partner Local Authorities. This will be an excellent opportunity for learning and collaborative working which can only serve to improve our offer to the children and families of our Borough. As part of this, BwD has been heavily involved in the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory research into babies who are born into care, and this week the teams co-presented a webinar detailing our journey so far. This piece of work is focussed on improving the experiences of new parents within the family justice system and it is hoped that our local family justice partners (solicitors, barristers and Judges) will join us on this journey. We are hoping to set up a larger, face-to-face educative event later in the year.

The Litigation team continues to focus on prosecutions in relation to waste, public protection and school non-attendance. During that last quarter 25 people were ordered to pay £5787 fines and £2404 costs by the Court. Currently over 30 prosecution cases are ongoing in the Magistrates Courts. Three of those are warrants matters and two are contested trials. Prosecution files are being submitted on an almost daily basis: 52 case files for waste prosecutions have been submitted to legal services this quarter, which is a total of 163 this financial year so far. In addition, the team has noted a positive shift in the award of fines in respect of waste which is deposited in rear alley ways. There is also a better response with more FPNs are being paid before enforcement action at court.

[More successful waste prosecutions for environmental crime team | The Shuttle: Blackburn with Darwen Council News](#)

In relation to 'non-school attendance prosecutions, 39 cases were issued in the last quarter, which is a total of 133 so far this financial year. 67 cases were dealt with in court during this period. Results for this financial year so far are £19,311 in fines and costs with the costs element being £5,333. There are several other prosecutions arising from instructions given by Public Protection notably a new case with at Preston Crown Court on 20 January 2023 relating to fraudulent trading and counterfeit cigarettes, another of the same completed (previously reported, with the defendants having already received suspended prison sentences) but awaiting proceeds of crime hearing in December. The team also completed the noise nuisance prosecution against a car dealer relating to unceasing noise from barking dogs on the site. The car dealer pleaded not guilty, failed to attend his trial and was fined £5000 and ordered to pay £3000 costs. He was also given a criminal behaviour order at another hearing that he attended. He is thought now to have moved off that site.

The Governance team is currently focusing heavily for the local elections in May, whilst also continuing to deal with complaints, administering school appeals, committee administration support and mayoralty/civic events. The planning and organisation for the local elections is well underway, working with the Communications team to ensure that all residents are aware of the Government's new Voter ID requirements for voting at polling stations. The Governance team have so far arranged bookings of polling stations and are recruiting polling station staff, which will require training on the new Voter ID requirements. The team will also assist in hosting the candidates and agents briefing before preparing for the receipt of nominations (between 24 March and 4.00pm on 4 April 2023), and thereafter continue with other electoral administration work and preparations for the verification and count."