

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: Strategic Director
of Finance and Resources
Thursday, 25 January 2024**

Business Rates

The Government has confirmed that the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure relief will continue for at least another year with all eligible businesses receiving the 75% reduction from the 2024/25 bills. The relief will be automatically applied to the bills and there will be no need for businesses to apply for the relief.

Benefits

The Department of Work and Pensions has confirmed that the roll out and migration of residents to Universal Credit will continue throughout 2024/25. It is still expected that all residents receiving tax credits will receive 'migration notices' by the end of March 2024. Other welfare benefits will now be migrated from April 2024 under clear timelines. Housing Benefit from April 2024, Income Support (April – June 2024), Employment Support Allowance with Child tax credits (July – September 2024) and Jobseekers Allowance (September 2024).

The migration to Universal Credit is a fundamental change to many individuals in the borough. The success of the migration and the impact on residents will continue to be monitored as it unfolds.

The Council Tax Support scheme has been reviewed and several amendments have been proposed in a separate report elsewhere on the Agenda for this meeting. In summary, the non-dependent deduction will be increased to £8 per week, and the maximum percentage of reduction will be reduced from 80% to 78%.

Statement of Accounts 2021/22 and 2022/23

Subject to work being completed on our Council Asset valuations and the External Auditor being satisfied with this, it is envisaged that audit of the Statement of Accounts for 2021/22 will be completed early in the new year.

Work on the production of the unaudited Statement of Accounts for 2022/23 is almost complete. Again, this has been held up due to work on the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts and on a small number of our Asset valuations which are expected to be completed soon.

Budget 2024/25

The Finance Team are working with Directors and Budget Holders developing the detail behind the Medium-Term Financial Plan for the 2024/25 financial year budget. 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 reported its progress delivering the 2023/24 audit plan to the Audit & Governance Committee meeting on 29 November. This covered the internal audit, counter fraud, and governance activity. The Committee also received a report updating members on the progress of actions being taken to address the significant issues noted in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement and the planned timetable to produce the 2023/24 Statement.

The Quarter 2 Risk Management Report was also presented to the Committee. This included a summary of the 23 strategic risks recorded as of 30 September and the movement in any residual risk score. The report also noted the outcome of the re-procurement of the contract for insurance broker services. This is a three-year contract with an option to extend for up to a further three years.

Procurement

The Procurement team have continued to support on a range of procurements. Notable procurements include the maintenance of Highways Structures, security for King George's Hall and a new contract for mobile phones which will reduce this to £20k per annum generating £88k worth of savings as well as providing access to the 5G network in the Council. The team have also been advising colleagues in Public Health and Commissioning teams on the new Provider Selection Regime which will come into force on 1st January for all Health Contracts.

Pay Award

The 2023 pay award for Green Book employees has been confirmed and all employees affected have received their new salary and back pay in their November salary.

Equal Pay

The Executive Member for Finance and Governance has given approval to establish a small project team to undertake an equal pay audit, which will ensure that the Council is fully compliant with all aspects of Equal Pay and implement actions to address any identified issues.

Legal

The Litigation Team continues to support the Council's Licensing Team by providing ongoing advice and representing them at court when a taxi driver appeals a decision to refuse and revoke licenses where a driver is not deemed to be fit and proper.

The same legal support continues for the enviro-crime team. 15 prosecutions in the Magistrates Court were finalised with a range of penalties from Conditional Discharges to fines. Total figures Costs £2400; Fines: £2800.

The Litigation Team has been dealing with difficult circumstances in the Magistrates' courts over the last three months due to the sudden closure of both Preston and Blackpool Magistrates Courts. This has led to many of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's cases being adjourned or vacated. CPS cases are prioritised by the Courts due to a defendant potentially being in custody. The Litigation Team's cases have also been moved without prior notice to Burnley or Lancaster. Despite these issues, the team has attended all the hearings of which they were made aware and have made progress with several cases. However, it is expected that this situation will continue into the spring and is affecting all local Councils across Lancashire.

Governance

All stages of the Annual canvass were completed, and the revised electoral register was published on 1st December 2023. The Governance team also assisted in carrying out the statutory polling district/polling place/polling station review in October. This was reported to Policy Council in December and all recommendations were approved.