

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: Strategic Director
of Finance and Resources
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TACKLING THE BUDGET CHALLENGE

Benefits

The residents of the Borough continue to be moved to Universal Credit. As of July 2024, over 27,000 residents are already on Universal Credit, and this is likely to increase as the Tax Credit system is due to close in April 2025. As part of that closure programme, the remaining pension age tax credit recipients will receive a notice asking them to either move to Pension Credit or Universal Credit, depending on their circumstances.

Despite the disruption to recipients of Housing Benefit, the average performance of processing new claims and changes in customer circumstances remains high at 6.6 days and 4.3 days, respectively.

During August 2024, MHCLG contacted the Council to seek support in driving a national Pension Credit promotion campaign and awareness raising with a view to encouraging those who are eligible to make a claim. To this end, the Service is working with the DWP, and Partnership Organisations to do this.

Business Rates & Council Tax

The online account for Council Tax and Business Rates will be improved with a major upgrade to the 'Citizens Access' software in the near future. There will be no disruption to customers during the upgrade and the improved look and feel should help the Council increase the number of users.

Financial Services

The Draft Statement of Accounts 2023/24 has been completed, and the Team are awaiting an update from the Council's external auditors for the start dates of their audit. The audit may well be affected by the Government's proposal for clearing the backlog of audit work, but this is subject to legislation on this matter which has recently been laid in Parliament.

The Team is working on Quarter 2 revenue and capital budget monitoring which will be taken to Executive Board in November.

Work is continuing on the development preparation of the 2025/26 Revenue and Capital Budgets and the 2025/28 Medium Term Financial Strategy. The Team is working alongside Directors and their Leadership teams.

Audit & Assurance

The Audit & Assurance Team has continued with the delivery of the 2024/25 Annual Internal Audit Plan approved by the Audit & Governance Committee in March. A Progress Report was presented to the Committee's September meeting for consideration. This provided members with details of the outcomes of the audit reviews completed to the end of August and a commentary on the counter-fraud work undertaken in the period since the last report. It included the outcomes to date of the follow-up of the data matches received back from the latest National Fraud Initiative, which is administered by the Cabinet Office.

The Committee also received a Risk Management Report setting out the risk management activities undertaken in the period, along with a summary of the strategic risks as at the end of June.

HR Services

The HR service is currently supporting managers as they prepare to welcome their new apprentices, who will start their career journey with the Council on 2nd September 2024. In total, there will be 24 apprentices and 4 graduates attending the Induction Day, working across all directorates and undertaking a variety of courses.

In recent years, recruitment has been an issue nationally and at Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council. However, we are currently in a strong position, with the average time to fill vacancies now reduced to an average of 21.6 days. Additionally, the number of vacant social worker positions is at the lowest in many years. We are also seeing a reduction in agency workers usage as more social workers take up direct roles with the Council.

We have also signed up for collaborative work with the Local Government Association (LGA) and Solace on a national recruitment campaign for local government. This promotion aims to highlight local authorities as desirable places to work. Additionally, we are working with Northwest Employers, who are committed to bringing councils together to reduce competition when working with agencies placing social workers. These campaigns are in the early stages, and more evidence of this work will be visible in the national media later in the autumn.

Organisational Development

The 4th staff Pulse Survey has been completed and nominations for the 3rd annual staff awards have been received.

We are continuing to support the Council's apprentices, graduates and employees who are accessing the apprentice levy to undertake their relevant qualifications. We are further developing our blended learning offer, maximising the use of our e-learning system while also providing face to face training where required. Our own leadership pathways programme has been developed, with 20 managers set to start this programme in October.

Corporate Procurement and Contracts

The Procurement Team has been preparing for the new Procurement Act 2023. Initially set to commence on 28 October, it will now come into effect on 24th February 2025. The new Act aims to open up public procurement, benefiting suppliers of all sizes, particularly start-ups, scale-ups, and small businesses.

One of the main features of the Act is the embedding of transparency throughout the commercial lifecycle. It will create a central digital platform for suppliers to register and store their details, enabling them to use these details for multiple bids and see all opportunities in one place. Simplified bidding processes will make it easier to bid, negotiate, and work in partnership with the Council.

The Procurement Team has been working to understand the implications, cascade knowledge, and draft changes to the Council's Contracts and Procurement Procedure Rules.

Legal

A long-standing sale of land with several legal hurdles in Darwen is now complete, allowing a local business to redevelop and expand in situ without the need to relocate.

The Property Legal team has also supported the Planning Department with an in-person planning inquiry, which is yet to be decided upon, and has successfully supported a judicial review application against a neighbouring authority's planning decision.

Additionally, the Property Legal team assisted with the completion of a Section 106 agreement this quarter, which, if implemented as envisaged, will generate £6.8 million for highways, healthcare, and education in the Borough.

There has been consistent demand for the Council's leasing of commercial and industrial properties over this quarter. This ranges from large industrial units currently under negotiation to smaller sites, such as one being leased as a music recording studio.

Although still in progress, the grants of long leases for several allotment sites are a current priority for the property team. The local allotment groups will gain increased autonomy to manage and develop the sites for the betterment of the local community, hopefully placing them in a position to apply for additional external grant funding.

Governance Team

The Governance Team has been actively engaged in post-election tasks, including collating and sending data to the Electoral Commission and Government. Additionally, we initiated the annual canvass for the new electoral register, starting with Route 2 (all properties/households unmatched by DWP). In August, we issued approximately 11,500 forms for mandatory completion and organised canvassers for the door-knocking stage, which began in mid-September.

Furthermore, the Team resumed school appeals after the summer break, with 52 appeals scheduled for September alone. To ensure we can meet the increasing demands and maintain resilience during critical periods, we are currently reviewing the Governance team structure (more details of this are in the update from the Executive Member for Digital and Governance).

EDI

We have successfully applied for Age-friendly Employer accreditation and are now working towards achieving the Disability Confident Leader accreditation. The Young Person's Inclusion Network has held its inaugural meeting. This is part of our Inclusion Network initiative, which has also seen the launch of the Women's Network. Additional Inclusion Networks will be introduced in the coming months. The Workforce EDI Forum continues to convene bi-monthly, while the Service User EDI Forum meet on a quarterly basis.