

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR RESOURCES – 28th March 2019

COUNCILLOR ANDY KAY

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICER: DENISE PARK

Benefits

Policy Council in December agreed several changes to the Council Tax Support scheme for 2019/20. In order to ensure adequate notice is given to those affected, the Benefits Team will be issuing letters explaining the changes in the next two weeks.

Citizens Advice will commence delivering support to Universal Credit claimants at the DWP office from the 1st April. This support replaces the previous model which was provided by Council staff and Shelter. The contract that Citizens Advice has agreed with the DWP is only intended to provide 'help to claim' and does not include any budgeting/debt or housing advice. Whilst Citizens Advice have indicated they will support claimants with debt issues, it is unlikely to be at the level provided by the Council and Shelter.

We will monitor the situation and impact on the claimants from the 1st April 2019.

Revenues

Business Rates

The government's new Retail discount will be introduced from the 1st April. Approximately 450 businesses will benefit from the new discount and receive a reduction of 1/3 in their Business Rates liability. All businesses who are entitled to the discount will be notified within the next few weeks and adjusted annual bills with the discount applied will be issued promptly in April 2019.

Council Tax

The premium Council Tax charge will be increased from 150% to 200% with effect from 1st April 2019. All properties that will be affected by this change in policy have been inspected over the last two weeks and owners notified of the impending change.

2019/20 Budgets, Medium Term Financial Strategy and Closure of Accounts 2018/19

The 2019/20 Revenue and Capital budgets and the Medium Term Financial Strategy were approved at Finance Council on 25th February 2019 and now the Finance team are working towards 2018/19 year-end closure and preparation of the 2018/19 statutory accounts.

Digital & Business Change

On February 5th The Council were confirmed as a signatory to the Local Government Digital Declaration, a collaboration between the UK Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Government Digital Service (GDS) and local authorities. The council will now form part of a collective of local authorities moving forward at pace to transform services for citizens and provide value for money through digital innovations. Being part of the declaration will also enable Blackburn with Darwen to access funded training programmes and bid for transformation funding.

The council have successfully bid for funding to develop a new digital health and care hub in Blackburn library. The hub will be used to coach residents in using online tools to manage their health and care, piloting a new digital health curriculum for our citizens. We are aiming to launch the hub during the spring working with partners in the NHS and The Good Things Foundation.

The directorate were part of the successful Hive Digital event held in February, where the council's digital strategy approach was presented and received positive feedback from stakeholders. The strategy approach was also scrutinised by councillors during a task group scrutiny session on the 25th February. The revised strategy draft is now nearing completion and will be reviewed during March.

Apprenticeships

Recruitment of council apprentices for 2019/20 is being planned and we are working closely with schools to offer work experiences and promoting working in The Council as a future career option for young people. Two recruitment evenings are taking place on Wednesday 27th March at Witton City Learning Centre 5.30pm until 8.00pm and Thursday 25th April at Darwen Vale High School 5.45pm until 8.00pm.

Modern.gov

The new Committee Management System continues to be rolled out across the Council to ensure efficiencies and improvements are delivered and assure an improved archive of past decisions is openly available. The Library area now also contains a number of useful documents such as the Councillors Poster, Flag Protocol, Forward Plan, Members Interests, Outside Bodies and the Year Planner. Access to all is via the Council Website.

Legal Services

LCC and Blackburn With Darwen Council recently submitted an entry under the category of business transformation for this year's Local Government Chronicle awards on the new Coroner's Service. Included in the submission was the work that was done around the merger, CT scanning, out of hours service, revised IT and operational procedures. There was tough competition and whilst we didn't actually win we were shortlisted along with 8 other entrants. Representatives from the authorities along with the Senior Coroner attended the awards ceremony in London on the 13th March. This demonstrates the positive working relationship we share with LCC following the merger along with a strengthened and improved service.