

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

23rd January 2020

COUNCILLOR ANDY KAY

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: LOUISE MATTINSON
DAVID FAIRCLOUGH**

People: A good quality of life for all our residents

Benefits

The Council Tax Support scheme is currently being finalised, whilst there will be minor changes to keep the scheme in line with national welfare benefit amendments, no other changes are envisaged for the new financial year.

The Benefits service continues to outperform all other councils in the region with quick and accurate assessment of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support new claims and changes in circumstances. Our latest figures for processing are 7.4 days for new claims and 3.4 days for changes in circumstances.

Council Tax and Business Rates

The Council Tax team has commenced initial discussions concerning a full and comprehensive review of single person discounts in the borough. The proposal is to work with a 3rd party to cross reference recipients of single person discount with credit reference and personal data. This will highlight customers who have simply failed to notify the council of a change in circumstance, and identify fraudulent cases. The additional money collected from this initiative will be reported to members over the 2020/21 financial year.

The Business Rates team has begun work on reviewing Small Business Rate relief cases. Working in partnership with a 3rd party, the team has identified 102 cases that have potentially fraudulently claimed the relief. As the team now has access to the national record of all recipients of Small Business Rate relief, this information can be compared to our own cases and those individuals with businesses out of the area can be pursued for backdated Business Rates.

A more comprehensive analysis of the cases and financial impact will be provided in the next Council Forum update.

Council: Delivered by a strong and resilient council

Council Budget 2020/21

Work is continuing with Members and Management Board to formulate the 2020/21 Council budget following the delayed issue of the Provisional 2020/21 Local Government Finance Settlement on 20th December 2019.

Audit & Assurance

The Audit & Assurance Team has continued its work to deliver the 2019/20 internal audit plan. The team reported its progress to the January Audit & Governance Committee meeting. The report included a summary of the red priority areas of concern identified in the Directors Management Accountability Framework Dashboard Reports at the end of September and commentary on the counter fraud work in the period, as well as the in-year review of the Plan. Changes in the plan were proposed, because of reduced resources. The revised plan will ensure that the highest priority audits will be completed in 2019/20 to support the Head of Audit & Assurance in issuing his annual audit opinion on the Council's framework of governance, risk and control.

Audit & Assurance also assessed the effectiveness of the Committee against the 2018 CIPFA best practice guidance for Audit Committees. The results were presented to the January meeting.

Contracts & Procurement

The Contracts and Procurement team have worked with colleagues in the Finance Team to refinance the second of the Council's Building Schools for the Future PFI Contracts. The team have also supported a number of procurement projects across the Council including the treatment and processing of recyclables and in respect of various works and supplies related to the refurbishment of the Old Town Hall, materials for use in Highways works and IT systems.

Legal Services

In October 2019 the Council had a RIPA desktop inspection by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office. This was to check the use of our surveillance powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. The desktop inspection consisted of a questionnaire and submission of background documents including our procedural guide. In feedback the Commissioner stated that he found the information we provided comprehensive, relevant and helpful. It was suggested that we should arrange a 'table top' exercise in order to assess staff knowledge and operational effectiveness should we engage with the Act. This is currently being arranged. There were two observations to be addressed in our ongoing RIPA procedural guide update. The third observation noted there had been no Covert Human Intelligence Source authorization [CHIS] by our Council since the last inspection. Nevertheless, the use and management of CHIS information had been the subject of debate and review by the Council. CHIS relates to the use and management of information passed to our staff by members of the public. A full day of CHIS training took place on 9th October and a half day on 29th November 2019 to maintain required knowledge and skills. Overall the report was very positive and it was confirmed that a physical inspection was not required. A report will be submitted to the Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the inspection outcome, also incorporating a general RIPA activity update.

HR Services

Work is ongoing to support Council departments consider workforce savings to deliver a balanced budget. This includes working with Adults, Neighbourhoods & Learning to arrange drop-in sessions at the end of January to allow individual employees to consider options around flexible working, that could contribute to workforce savings. Work continues with colleagues in Digital & Business Change to accelerate modern working and prepare for the movement of staff to more modern offices as part of the Town Hall refurbishment project.

Governance Services

The Governance Services team managed and successfully delivered the 'snap' General Election on 12th December 2019. This was delivered at a particularly challenging time of year and the team are also grateful for the support of a range of staff from all departments, as well as other casual employees, who ensured the effective delivery of the Election. In parallel to organising the General Election, the Governance Team also completed the Canvass process for Electoral Registration and published the new Register in December. The various Remembrance events in November were successfully delivered and very well attended. Planning is now underway for Holocaust Memorial Day at the end of January 2020.