

FINANCE AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO 2019/21

Financial Services

I should like to thank Paul Thompson and the Financial Services team for all their hard work in helping to maintain a sound financial basis for the Council and in producing balanced budgets for 2020/21 and 2021/22. The Council has not only had to operate under austerity measures for the last eleven years, but this last year has had additional financial challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, the team largely worked from home and still managed to accomplish the following :-

- Successfully delivered the closure of the 2019/20 accounts within the statutory deadlines
- Implemented 'procure to pay' arrangements leading to smarter payment of invoices
- Processed 12,391 grant transactions to local businesses with a value of over £50.2M, with the majority of successful applicants receiving their grants within 3 working days
- Provided government returns in allotted timeframes regarding business grants, additional covid expenditure and loss of sales, fees and charges

Revenues and Benefits

I should like to thank Adrian Robinson and the Revenues and Benefits team for all their hard work in developing and administering Covid grant schemes in addition to their normal activities.

The service has succeeded in:

- Developing and administering a range of Business Grant schemes in line with Government Guidance and handling increasing customer service demands within existing resources.
- Having the best Collection Rate amongst Lancashire authorities for Business Rates 2020/21 (97.2% in year)
- Distributing Council Tax Hardship payments (maximum £300), to Council Tax Support recipients throughout the year. Over £1m distributed to 4,400 recipients
- Handling increased Housing Benefit take-up within existing performance targets (New claims processed within 16.7 days, change events within 5.1 days) ensuring that vulnerable customers receive assistance in a timely manner.
- Administering Self-Isolation payments to those suffering financial hardship as a result of an instruction to self-isolate

Democratic Services

I should like to thank Debbie Chambers and the Democratic Services team for the way in which they quickly and successfully introduced the online meeting formats needed because of the pandemic.

Last year was a year of unprecedented innovation for Democratic Services. The onset of the pandemic led to a rapid introduction of online meeting formats, with wide ranging technological support and new ways of working to ensure democratic votes could take place. Lancaster was very quick to move to remote meeting, with meetings starting to take

place this way within a few weeks of lockdown. Participation by members has been excellent, with many finding the remote format meant they were able to continue to vote even during ill health, and to better balance council roles with work and family commitments. The pandemic has demonstrated the success of new, more hybrid ways of working and we will continue work with government to establish opportunities for continued remote meetings where they are fit for purpose. Planning began for a return to face to face meetings in a safe distance format and the first of these was successfully held in May 2021.

More creative thinking and a significant amount of new logistics and planning were required to hold County, Police and Crime Commissioner and local bye elections, to ensure a safe election and count.

Legal Services

I should like to thank Luke Gorst and the Legal Services team for all their hard work in continuing to support the good governance of the Council, by providing legal and procedural advice to Services in their operational activities, and to officers and members in the decision making process.

Legal Services have been involved with projects undertaken by officers in all services in the Council and have played key roles in contract drafting and negotiation as well as providing advice on strategy, risk and statutory compliance. Most notably officers have been heavily involved with the exciting Eden North project.

In supporting other services of the Council, Legal Services have again undertaken a number of successful prosecutions including fly tipping and planning matters.

The day-to-day legal work incorporating debt collection, rating cases, recovery of rent arrears, council house sales and other property transactions, including sales and leases, has continued, as has the provision of a local land charges service, and the licensing and information management functions.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Despite the pandemic, work continued across the authority to better align priorities, analysis, systems and reporting with the SDGs. Workshops were held and expert input led to a framework of 4 thematic priorities (environment, society, economy, governance), with 6 sub themes identified, supported by key indicators to support better, more informed decision making about the impact of Council actions and choices, and enable more consistent reporting to allow benchmarking of council and area performance. This new approach is nearing completion with project evaluation and council impact reporting being implemented during 2021/22.

A Local Procurement Strategy was also agreed, creating greater opportunities for local businesses and organisations to access council contracts, and the procurement team have embedded the use of 'the social value portal' which helps us to understand the wider impacts and benefits of our procurement on the economy, environment and society.

The council's work on SDGs was recognised in a Local Government Association seminar earlier this year which has led to follow up work on pilots with the ONS and Treasury.

I should like to thank all officers for their valuable contributions to this work.

Councillor Anne Whitehead
Portfolio Holder with responsibility for Finance and Resources