

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of

Portfolio Holder for Finance, ICT, and Enabling Services (Cllr Dr Brian Cooper)

Aligned to “Help me to be Financially Independent”

FINANCE

The finance team’s activities include accountancy, payroll and payments. The Payroll team also provide the service for Redditch Borough Council and Wyre Forest District Council. There are 5 separate payrolls comprising of approximately 900 staff. The Payment section ensures that all the invoices from our suppliers are paid in a timely manner and on average there are approximately 5000 invoices paid out every year. The finance team provides all financial advice and support to Members and officers, undertakes treasury management and investment activities and prepares all statutory accounting reports.

The audit of the Council’s accounts for 2016/2017 has been completed without any major concerns. The accounts were presented to our external auditors a month early on 31st May. This was in preparation of the new deadline for the 2017/18 statutory accounts closedown of May 2018. The audited accounts and the opinion of the external auditors will be presented to the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee on September 14 and thereafter to Council.

Over the last 12 months the team have continued to assess the impact of the financial pressures and on-going reduction in funding seen by the Authority. There is a major effort to improve budget setting in the Council. The finance team are now focusing on revenue monitoring and in particular the identification of additional savings that may be available for 2017/18 in light of the significant saving achieved by the Council in 2016/17. We aim to improve monitoring to see that agreed efficiency savings targets have been met.

The team work hard to ensure that the financial information that is presented to members to enable them to make informed decisions over a 4 year period, is clear. However, preparation of the Medium Term financial plan is becoming more challenging. The uncertainties relating to significant future funding streams have made financial planning more difficult particularly in light of the delayed implementation of the Business Rate Localisation scheme and late changes to the New Homes Bonus Scheme. The team are supporting officers with the financial modelling of income generating projects that form part of the commercial focus that the Council is developing to ensure financial sustainability in the future. All the financial work will feed into the review of the Medium Term Financial Plan to ensure that we have a robust budget for the next 4 years.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT UPDATE

Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services team deliver the provision of financial support through Housing Benefits, Council Tax Support (CTS), Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), and the Essential Living Fund (ELF). The team work with customers to identify their needs and then establish the best approach for helping the customer with their specific issues. Many customers have transactional needs such as 'collect the right amount of money owed', 'process my benefits claim in a timely manner', 'if I am entitled to financial support, help me claim the right amount', and 'make it easy for me to pay anything I have to pay the Council'. For these customers, the emphasis is on timely and accurate processing of information and claims and on providing a wide variety of payment mechanisms. However, some customers have more complex needs and we try to help them access a wider range of financial support and advice, to address their immediate needs as well as to help them improve their financial independence and make sustainable choices for the future.

During the last 12 months the focus of the service has been to implement a unified Revenues and Benefits IT system, and to carry out a full service review to ensure that the structure and resources within the service meets the needs of our customers. The move to a unified single system has been a 16 month project and was completed in August 2017. This huge project consisting of two work flow conversions, one revenues conversion, the introduction of OPENChannel and Ebenefits (online services) and process automation. We are one of only a handful of authorities across the Country to have fully shared our Revenues and Benefits systems and the rewards are already coming through as savings on software support. Work streams are now in place to maximise the use of increased functionality and capitalise on further online, automated and improved service delivery mechanisms.

The Service Review was agreed by Council in April and is being implemented in accordance with agreed procedure. Following full consultation with staff and trade unions, the structure is being implemented as proposed. There are 7 officers, across the whole team who will be leaving through voluntary redundancy, of these 2 were formally BDC employees. There have been no compulsory redundancies. The total cost of redundancies to BDC is £28k.

The key challenge in the near future is the full roll out of Universal Credit (UC). Although this will not occur fully until May 2018, Job Centres are going live at different times and the impact will start to take effect from October 2017. Staff training has been provided by DWP, and a Delivery Partnership Arrangement is in place between the authority and DWP to provide face to face, personal budgeting and online support.

The move to UC will bring administrative challenges in respect to the Local Council Tax Support Scheme which will not mirror national benefits. Officers will be carrying out a comprehensive review, in conjunction with colleagues across the County, to explore a county wide scheme to ensure consistency as well as to minimise the cost of administration.

Support to businesses most impacted by the re-evaluation of business rates on their premises, will be in place by the end of the calendar year. The Government has

provided local authorities with funding so that they may design their own local schemes to support ratepayers facing significant increases in their bills. The Discretionary Revaluation Support Policy will be coming forward in October and, if agreed, administered by the Revenues Team.

LEGAL SERVICES UPDATE

The legal team operate as a support service providing advice and guidance to elected Members and officers throughout the Authority and doing the legal work associated with Council services. Their aim is to ensure that the decisions of the Council are legal and proportionate, the actions and decisions of the Council are in the public interest, and all Council documentation is robust. From time to time the team represent the Council in Civil and Criminal proceedings and we also provide contracted external legal support to other public organisations.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES UPDATE

Democratic Services team have been supporting Members in various roles throughout the year, including all Council Committees, Boards and Working Groups.:

Overview and Scrutiny

Earlier in the Meeting, Council received the Annual Report from the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Board which illustrates the variety of issues which have been addressed by the Board over the past year. The number of items which have been pre-scrutinised prior to consideration by the Cabinet, has increased and the system of scrutiny is working more smoothly. Council has referred directly to the O&S Board, a number of issues arising from notices of motion, for example to enable them to be considered in greater detail and in a more meaningful way. The Finance and Budget Working Group continues to work well on a cross party basis. As portfolio holder, I try to attend the meetings regularly as I want to maintain a good relationship with the Group to help us to address the significant financial challenges that the Council faces. To date the director of finance and I have found the meetings very constructive and informative.

Member Training

The Member Development Steering Group has looked at further training sessions which will be useful and accessible to Members. A recent session on Finance training was well received by Members. Officers are arranging workshops to take place in the autumn on Strategic Housing and Welfare reform issues. In addition there will be the usual refresher sessions on data protection and safeguarding. I hope Group Leaders will continue to work with officers to ensure that the Training Programme offered continues to reflect their Group Members' training needs.

ELECTORAL SERVICES UPDATE

Polls held in Bromsgrove District Council Area in 2017

The Norton District by-election held on 19 January, the County Election for Worcestershire was held on 4 May, and the UK Parliamentary (General) Election and the District by-election of Alvechurch Village Ward were held on 8 June. Both major polls covered the whole District geographical area but were held on different franchises (the County poll was held on a local election franchise and the Parliamentary on its own franchise).

Norton by-election was contested by four candidates; one each from the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Green party and UKIP. There were two polling stations and turnout was 25%.

Worcestershire County Council election: 39 candidates stood in the nine County Divisions in the Bromsgrove District Council area. The Conservative Party, Green Party and Liberal Democrats stood in all nine seats, the Labour Party in seven, UKIP in two, Wythall Residents Association in one and independents in two. Fifty seven polling stations were used employing 155 polling staff. There were 10,769 postal voters (8 were sent overseas) and 60 proxy voters appointed. The count was held in the hall at Parkside and turnout ranged from 31.52% to 39.54%. In the 2013 election, turnouts ranged from 26.57% to 32.59%.

UK Parliamentary election: On 18 April a General Election was called for 8 June. As a result, there were a number of organisational issues due to the short timetable for the General Election and the overlapping with the County Election timetable. The latter caused some confusion amongst some electors. There were candidates representing the Conservative Party, the Green Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. The electorate was 73,585 and 54,246 ballot papers were issued including 12,916 for postal votes (175 of these were for electors overseas) and 398 for voters who wished vote by proxy. The turnout was 73.73%, compared to 71.9% in 2015.

Polling stations were very busy, but no significant queues were reported. The 60 polling stations were staffed by 157 Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks. The count was held on the Thursday night in the Dolphin Centre Sports Hall because of the size of the turnout.

Alvechurch Village by-election was held alongside the Parliamentary election which led to a turnout of 77.88%. There were four candidates; one from the Conservative Party, one from the Liberal Democrats and two independents.

Household Enquiry Form Canvass

Even though people are required to register individually, the Electoral Registration Officer still has to conduct a canvass of all properties within the District, which needs to be completed by the end of November. Because of the two large polls, the start of the canvass was delayed. Forms have now been delivered and are being returned via post, internet, phone or text, giving households as much choice as possible. For those properties that do not respond after a reminder letter, canvassers are sent to

make a personal visit. This year canvassers will be trialling computer tablets instead of paper forms, in some areas

Electoral Registration Promotion

Electoral Services Staff held a number of promotions in schools and attended the MP's Pensioner Fair. Electoral Services will be using Individual Electoral Registration funding to provide canvassers to help year round with the registration of electors. This is in addition to staff visiting care homes and working with schools on electoral promotion.

LEGAL, EQUALITIES AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES DEPARTMENTAL RESTRUCTURE

Members will be aware that as a result of the departure earlier this year of two senior officers within Legal, Democratic and Elections, the Head of Service undertook a re-structure of the department, which was approved by the Council. This was an opportunity for the Head of Service to put in place a structure which will support the Council in its decision-making processes and also provide the level of legal support required to support the Council's 'commercialisation' initiative. The process has now been completed and the new arrangements have been in place since 1 September 2017.

ICT

The ICT team have been busy this year with the following activities:

- Migrated the remote access 'Good' service to 'Blackberry' after Blackberry bought the company that provides the Good application
- Introduced web advertising to the Councils Internet site to promote income generation.
- Implemented an asset management system and automatic security patching of devices such as PC's/Laptops
- Updated all ICT Security devices
- Updated all Local Area Network devices.
- Ensured the corporate infrastructure remained secure against the global ransomware attack that caused significant issues for other organisations.
- Corrected issues with Members access to the measures dashboard
- Provided technical support and guidance to the Single Revenues & Benefits System project. The project has successfully placed BDC and RBC onto a single shared technical system platform.
- Provided technical support and guidance to the Single Planning System. Successfully placing BDC & RBC onto a single shared technical system platform.
- Achieved PSN (Public Services Network) accreditation for 2016/17
- Successfully implemented a new contract with an external supplier to provide infrastructure support

EMERGENCY PLANNING

Within the requirements of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, Bromsgrove District Council, as a category 1 responder (as are all local authorities), must assess the risks of an emergency occurring and maintain plans for dealing with that emergency. Bromsgrove District Council is partner to a shared service arrangement for emergency planning within North Worcestershire with the lead authority being Wyre Forest District Council. This arrangement has been in place for a number of years with the current service level agreement in place until March 2020. Officers are currently undertaking a review of the Council's Emergency Plan and emergency planning arrangements following the tragic events at Grenfell Tower earlier this year. This review will encompass the Cabinet Office guidance in respect of:-

- Preventing an emergency
- Reducing and mitigating the effects of an emergency
- Taking action in connection with an emergency

As the Portfolio Holder lead, I have been appraised and advised of the current emergency planning arrangements, in addition to receiving assurance in respect of:-

- Out of hours duty and emergency response arrangements
- Rest Centre Plans
- Current position regarding our business continuity arrangements

I will receive further updates as the review progresses, including proposed developmental areas and the potential for a wider Member awareness briefing and training.