

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of

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

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 1400 staff. The Payment section ensures that all the invoices from our suppliers are paid in a timely manner and on average there are approximately 6000 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 Council's accounts for 2017/18 were completed to the new deadline of 31st May with approval by Members by July 2018, 2 months earlier than 2016/17. The Council received an unqualified judgement for both the statutory accounts and the Value for Money assessment which was an improvement on previous years.

Officers within the finance teams continue to work with service managers and budget holders to identify savings and support the development of business cases to generate additional income to the Council. Over the next few months the focus will be financial modelling of the Medium Term Financial Plan to 2022/23.

The uncertainties relating to significant future funding streams continue to make projections more challenging. Potential changes to New Homes Bonus, Business Rate Localisation and the impact of Negative Grant from 2019/20 make robust financial planning more difficult.

Recent approval has been granted for the implementation of an Enterprise Resource Planning solution. It is apparent that over the last few years weaknesses have been identified in the financial management, planning and forecasting capabilities of the systems we currently have in place. In addition, it has been reported by officers, external and internal audit and more recently within the peer challenge report that the finance system we have does not enable the Council to make decisions based on accurate, timely and flexible information which will become increasingly important to meet the future challenges in the commercial environment. It is also recognised that there are a significant number of manual processes that are undertaken in payroll, payments and HR to ensure that data can be accessed and reported on by officers and external partners. Furthermore there are no seamless links between systems and information has to be manually transferred between the system. This could cause potential data issues when considering consistent information.

Therefore officers have considered other solutions and in particular the Enterprise System model that would provide a flexible, integrated solution for the Council. The implementation will be led by the Financial Services Manager and will ensure involvement by budget holders and managers to ensure the system meets their needs. We are currently out for clarification from companies who are within the G-Cloud procurement framework. We expect to award the contract by the end of September and implementation will be from October 2019 to allow sufficient time to redesign systems and processes for the future.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

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.

The new structure, approved by Council last year, was implemented in December 2017 and the staff are now working to their new roles and responsibilities. These include:

- Financial Independence Team – the team provide personal budgeting support and advice both from Parkside and alongside BDHT. This enables the team to understand the customer need and to provide appropriate support to maximise their income. In addition this team assesses the hardship claims and the Discretionary Hardship Payments.
- Recovery Team – the team look to recover income due to the Council whilst supporting those less able with support and advice
- Welfare Support Officers – the team provide assessment support and claim processing for around 5000 claimants across the District. The roll out of Universal Credit (UC) will occur in September 2018. 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.

It is anticipated that the move to UC will bring administrative challenges in respect to the Local Council Tax Support Scheme which will not mirror national benefits. Officers are currently reviewing the scheme to enable members to consider any changes for implementation in April 2019.

Officers will continue to review services provided to ensure that our residents have advice and support to manage their financial position despite future changes.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

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

Overview and Scrutiny

At its last meeting, Council received the Annual Report from the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Board which illustrated 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.. 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.

LEGAL SERVICES

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.

ELECTORAL SERVICES

Polls held in Bromsgrove District Council Area in 2018

Up to this point there have been no polls held within the Bromsgrove District Council Area in 2018. The Neighbourhood Plan for Alvechurch Parish is currently under independent examination and subject to the examiner's report there will be a neighbourhood planning referendum held later in the year.

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. Forms have now been delivered and are being returned via post, internet, phone or text, giving households as much choice as possible. At the beginning of September Electoral Services have received a response from nearly 70% of households within the District area. Reminders are due to be sent out mid September followed up by a personal canvass between October

and November. This year, wherever possible, canvassers will be using electronic tablets to save on the cost of printing.

Electoral Canvassing all year round

Electoral Services are using Government funding to improve the canvassing service all year round. Two part time canvassers are being employed to chase up registrations made throughout the year. In addition they will be visiting care homes and building up relationships to improve the accuracy of the Electoral Register.

Remaining part of the year

After publishing the revised register after the canvass finishes at the end of November Electoral Services will be preparing for the District and Parish elections in May 2019 and beginning work on the statutory Polling Districts, Places and Stations Review.

IT SERVICES

As an enabling service, the role of the IT Service is to enable other parts of the organisation to deliver against the corporate strategic purposes. IT makes a key contribution to the strategic direction of the Council by providing professional support and guidance relating to the use of technological resources now and for the future. The main projects that IT *have worked* on over the last twelve months are:-

- Implementation of a single Revenues and Benefits system.
- Rollout of Docmail remote printing
- Security patching of PC's and servers.
- New firewall and security devices implemented.
- Implemented web site advertising.
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) preparation and go-live
- Street Naming & Numbering became financially cost neutral.
- Uniform application upgraded.
- Upgraded the corporate telephone system.

The main projects IT *are working* on at the moment are:-

- New corporate enterprise application for Finance, Cash Receipting, Payroll and Self-Serve HR (Human Resources).
- Upgrading from Windows 7 to Windows 10 across the technical estate
- Implementing PSN Security Audit changes.
- Upgrade server infrastructure.
- Business case for MS Office upgrade (Office 365).
- Commercialism initiatives – e.g. Local Lottery.
- New corporate printing solution.
- Change telephone infrastructure to new SIP standard.
- Review Members IT requirements.

HUMAN RESOURCES & ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

As an enabling service, the role of the HR & OD Service is to enable other parts of the organisation to deliver against the corporate strategic purposes. HR & OD makes a key contribution to the strategic direction of the Council by providing

professional support and leadership relating to the use of employee resources now and in the future.

The service does this by working closely with departments to build and maintain good employee's relations. Corporately, the service also works collaboratively with the Trade Unions at both a local and regional level.

The key projects HR & OD are currently delivering are:

- Ongoing implementation of the HR & OD Strategy
- Rolling out the new Staff Benefits package – including, staff discounts, financial advice, purchasing annual leave (coming soon) etc
- Implementation and expansion of the HR self-serve system across the authority enabling managers and employees to record / apply for:
 - Expenses
 - annual leave
 - sickness
 - recording status meetings (1:2:1's)
 - appraisals
 - booking of training courses
 - management information reporting for managers
 - review of the establishment for the authority and reporting lines to enable the relationships in the self-serve system and the ability to talk to other systems going forward
- Policy review programme including reviewing the Disciplinary, Grievance and Sickness Policies
- Reviewing the Induction Process
- Rolling out the skills matrix to identify skills gaps and potential within our workforce and the ability to record the data on the self-serve
- Supported on the implementation and roll out of the System Performance Framework and Appraisal process
- Implemented online e-forms for managers
- Reviewing and updating pay spines
- Co-ordinating corporate and service based training
- Supporting service reviews & TUPE transfers (where appropriate)
- Reviewing the corporate approach to the use of agency staff and relaunching Matrix (agency system)

EMERGENCY PLANNING

As per the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) Bromsgrove District Council, who as a local authority is a Category 1 responder, continues to work actively with multi-agency partners to identify, and manage risks through the development and maintenance of response and recovery plans.

Corporately the Emergency Plan and the Business Continuity Plan are in the final stages of review and agreement via CMT in October. These will integrate the lessons identified and learned from recent local incident debriefs as well as national reports following major incidents, namely the Manchester Arena attack. Internal training of duty officers continues to take place twice yearly, briefing them on updated local and Corporate plans and arrangements and opportunities for attendance at multi-agency exercises are advertised.

The Rest Centre Plan review is currently underway and plans to include both training and exercising of newly recruited officers. Looking forward the civil contingencies and resilience manager is developing standardised training for members across the Local Resilience Forum (LRF), and potentially more detailed training for portfolio holders and the Leader etc.

Emergency Planning seeks to manage the impact of the incident through trained and exercised plans, addressing both response and recovery. Some of these arrangements are internal and others are multi-agency. The active engagement within the LRF ensures Bromsgrove District Council view is heard and appropriate actions detailed within live documentation. The Shared Service, covering the 3 Councils in North Worcestershire, remains in place until March 2020. However the current post holder will be ongoing on maternity leave in December 2018, with cover arrangements pending discussion at the Client Management Group, to ensure our statutory responsibilities remain to be actively undertaken.