

**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling****Introduction and Overview:**

At Bromsgrove District Council Portfolio Holders provide an annual update to Council on services within their portfolio remit. These services are delivered in accordance with the Council's Strategic Purposes, as detailed in the Bromsgrove District Council Plan 2019 – 2023.

This report provides an outline of services and activities within the remit of this particular Portfolio Holder. Information is included in relation to the Council's Strategic Purposes, relevant key activities, partnership working, projects and programmes and news stories.

A version of this report, focusing on each Portfolio Holder's remit in turn, will be considered at each meeting of Council (except for the Annual Council meeting).

Whilst services will be contributing information into this report it is worth noting that not all sections of the report will be relevant to all service areas. In this circumstance, some sections may not be completed by all services.

The report will be structured as follows:

- 1) Update on Strategic Purposes
- 2) Partnership working
- 3) Key activities and priorities
- 4) Good news stories and awards (if applicable)
- 5) Other

The Council has the following Strategic Purposes and Priorities:

<b>Strategic Purposes</b>	<b>Council Priorities</b>
Run and grow a successful business	Economic development and regeneration
Work and financial independence	Skills for the future
Living independent, active and healthy lives	Improving health & well being
Affordable and sustainable homes	A balanced housing market
Communities which are safe, well maintained and green	Reducing crime & disorder
The Green Thread runs through the Council Plan	<b>Internal priorities</b>
	Financial stability
	High quality services
	Sustainability

**This report Covers the following Services Areas**

- 1) Finance and Customer Services
- 2) Business Transformation and Organisational Development
- 3) Democratic Services and Elections
- 4) Legal Services



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

**Finance and Customer Services**

**Business Transformation and Organisational Development**

**1. Update on Strategic Purposes**

**Relevant Strategic Purpose:**

Finance and Customer Services covers Finance, Revenues and Benefits, and Customer Services. Although most aspects of finance and some aspects of both Revenues and Benefits and Customer Services are enabling in nature, many aspects are also Direct in nature as well. For the enabling services the key priority is to support all services areas in the delivery of high-quality services whilst ensuring the organisation remains financially stable. The council plan is clear on the role of enabling services, outlining that this support is achieved by focusing on the three key themes of people, partnerships and performance.

**Key activities since last report:**

The service area covers a range of activities and it must be remembered that in 2021/22 significant support was still being delivered for C-19 especially linked to the support of businesses and our individual clients

**Finance**

The Council implemented a new financial system in February 2021. The existing financial system was at the end of its useful life and would not deliver process improvements required to move the Council forward. This implementation has not been smooth and has led to a deterioration of the Council's financial position. This has included:

- Non completion of the 2020/21 Accounts.
- Non delivery of monitoring information during the 2021/22 financial year.
- Non delivery of Government financial returns.
- Incomplete take-up of the new system by both Finance and Service Users.
- Loss of key financial staff.

The Council has lost significant financial expertise with the exiting of staff leaving the department below a critical mass. External resource has been needed to rectify the solution in the short term. Part of this process has been to set out a rectification process which sets out the key issues to be resolved and a critical path for that resolution. A report on this rectification process is on the agenda for Cabinet on the 14<sup>th</sup> September.

As with any plan, there is a critical path to delivery. With this plan, the critical path centres on the rectification of issues being encountered with the cash receipting system. With this resolved the Council will be able to close the 2020/21 accounts and cease the manual work rounds that are presently required. Items on the plan only turn to green when they have been rectified and there is proof that they are working.



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

Since the start of the recovery programme in March 22 the following has been delivered:

- Resources
  - The Council has run 2 sets of Recruitments in November 2021 and April 2022. Most establishment roles are now filled (Agency where relevant – this is now down to 4 roles).
- The following Strategies have been delivered
  - 21/22 Closure timetable
  - Treasury Management Strategy, including Capital, MRP and Investment Strategies were presented to Cabinet in May 2022.
  - Risk Reports have been presented to both Cabinet and Audit Committee in July 2022.
  - The 2022/23 Medium Term Financial Strategy was approved by Council in February 2022.
- Monitoring Reports
  - Period 11 Monitoring 2021/22 Reports were presented to Cabinet in May 2022.
  - A Period 1 Monitoring Report for 2022/23 was reported to cabinet in June 2022. Although there were no financial updates in this report it set out the process to be followed this year for monitoring (on system), the process being taken to rectify the Council's budgetary position, and a number of financial indicators including collection rates for both Council Tax and Business Rates.
  - A combined Quarter 1 2022/23 Finance and Monitoring report has been reported to Cabinet on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 2022.
- Returns - The Council are required to report on a number of financial measures to the Government via a series of Returns. Due to the systems-based issues the completion of the RO/CO Returns is still not possible. However, the following returns have been made:
  - Revenue Estimates 2021/22 and 2022/23 (RA).
  - PWLB Certainty Rate 2022/23 – sets out borrowing requirements.
  - HRA Pooled Capital Receipts 2021/22.
  - Council Tax Requirement (CTR1) 2022-23.
  - Quarterly return of Council Tax and NNDR (Q4 2021/22 and Q1 2022/23).
  - C-19 Grant Assurance Returns for 2021/22.
  - Housing Benefit Subsidy Return 2021/22.
  - DHP Government Contribution Final Claim for 2021-22.
  - Test and Trace Payments 2021/22.
  - NNDR3 Return for Business Rates.

**Revenues**

On top of the usual collection of Council Tax and Business Rates, significant payments have been distributed to businesses and individuals both during year 2 of C-19 and also the “cost of living” crises.

- Council Tax Collection Rate 2021/22 - 97.96%
- NDR Collection Rate 2021/22 - 95.08%
- Council Tax Chargeable Dwellings 31st March 2022 - 42,600
- NDR rateable hereditaments 31st March 2022 - 3,512



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

- Number of CTR Claimants
  - 2178 Working Age
  - 1827 Pension Age
- Restart Grants
  - 492 Grant Recipients
  - £3,686,706 Total Expenditure for Restart Scheme
- Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant
  - 125 Grant Recipients
  - £449,356 Total Expenditure for Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Scheme
- Additional Restrictions Grant
  - 704 Grants Paid
  - £2,825,238.47 Value of Grants
- Covid Additional Relief Fund Awarded 22/23
  - 574 Accounts Awarded Relief
  - £1,916,475.62 Relief Awarded
- Council Tax Energy Rebate: Mandatory Rebate:
  - 25,397 Direct Payments to Households
  - 2,063 Council Tax Account Credits
  - Total 27,460 households received payment
- Council Tax Energy Rebate: Discretionary Scheme
  - 317 Discretionary Payments of £150 Allocated
    - 172 Direct Payments have been made to households
    - 145 payments available for customer to claim payment
  - 3,759 Top-up payments of £30 to lowest income households
    - 1,181 Direct Payments have been made to households
    - 2,578 payments available for customer to claim

**Customer Services**

- Payments 'in-person' have fallen by 86% since the pandemic, as well as the implementation of allpay. Prior to the pandemic, there were on average 1400 transactions per month (70 per day). As of 12/09/22, this has now fallen to below 200 per month (9 per day)
- General 'in-person' enquiries have fallen by 44% since the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, there were on average 800 enquiries per month (40 per day). As of 12/09/22, this has now fallen to below 450 per month (22 per day) which has increased from 2021 due to enquiries regarding the energy rebate scheme.
- Since the pandemic, Customer Services staff have taken on all front facing calls for revenues (council tax, business rates, grants and energy rebate) whilst still maintaining a presence in the Customer Service Centre across Bromsgrove and Redditch.
- During 21-22, there was a total of 1870 'walk-in' general enquiries at Parkside Customer Services (average 8 enquiries per day), of which 25% related to location of Job Centre, Library and Registration Services (all contained within the building complex)

**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling****Payments & General Enquiries**

	FY 19-20	FY 20-21*	FY 21-22
Number of Payments	14,400	1,506	1,845
General Enquiries	9,692	644	1,870
% General enquiries related to building	22	14	25

\* closed for 6 months in total due to pandemic

**Telephone Calls**

	Total	Average wait time (mm:ss)	Average Queue Size	Average call length (mm:ss)	Average wrap-up time (mm:ss)	Total time per customer (mm:ss)	Average number of staff (shared service)
Switchboard BDC	8,683	00:51	0.02	00:45	00:00	00:45	1.96
Revenues (shared service)	24,147	06:38	1.27	07:51	02:54	10:45	4.77

**Anticipated Activities/Key Milestones For Next Period****Finance**

It is clear from the limited rollout of new financial systems processes in both the finance team and the wider Council that a significant retraining process will need to be undertaken. This had been timetabled initially for April/May but this has now been revised to September/October as we need resolution of the financial systems issues to properly take this forward. As part of this process there will be:

- Updated/simplified financial regulations
- Updated/simplified Step by Step guides

In addition to this, the following items will be delivered:

- Completion of the Cash Receipting fixes in Tech1
- Quarter 2,3 and 4 Combined Finance and Performance reports
- Statement of Accounts 2020/21
- Statement of Accounts 2021/22
- Revised 2020/21 Outturn Report
- 2021/22 Outturn Report
- Half Yearly Treasury Management Update Report
- Treasury Outturn Report 2021/22
- Completion of 2020/21 and 2021/22 RO/CO Returns
- Whole Government Accounts (WGA) for 2020/21 and 2021/22.
- 2023/24 Medium Term Financial Strategy

**Revenues**



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

- The Council will continue to collect Council Tax and Business Rates. The collection rates for the first 3 months of 2022/23 are:
  - Council Tax – 0.75% below Target
  - Business Rates – On Target
- Respond to the Government on Validation data for
  - Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant
  - Covid Additional Relief Fund Awarded 22/23
  - Additional Restrictions Grant
  - Council Tax Energy Payments
- Estimate of the 2023/24 Council Tax and Business Rates bases
- Delivery of Quarterly Government Returns
- Possible delivery of other grants from the Government to businesses and individuals
- Reduction of debt backlogs

**Customer Services**

- Moving forwards, we would like to increase the size of the team and increase the range of telephone enquiries using an 80/20 model of customer service across most council services as the majority of customers access council services via telephone and online, whilst still maintaining a small in-person presence for general enquiries on site. Further detail is contained within the “Service Business Plan 2023-2026 – Customer Services” (TBC)

**Partnership working:**

**Finance**

- The service is a shared service with Redditch.
- Getting staff up to appropriate skills (Finance and system to discharge their roles)

**2. Good News Stories and Awards (if applicable)**

- Successful staffing up to almost establishment.
- Movement forward of the Finance Recovery Programme
- Delivery of Grants from the Government to Businesses and Individuals

**3. Other (including risks, opportunities, issues not raised elsewhere).**

The biggest risk to finance (and all services) is the level of Government Funding as part of the 2023/24 Local Government Settlement and the ongoing level of inflation.

**Business Transformation and Organisational Development**

**4. Update on Strategic Purposes**





**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

**Relevant Strategic Purpose:**

The enabling services key priority is to support all services areas in the delivery of high quality services whilst ensuring the organisation remains financially stable. The council plan is clear on the role of enabling services, outlining that this support is achieved by focusing on the three key themes of people, partnerships and performance.

**Key activities since last report:**

**ICT**

- Supported the technical elements of the implementation of Tech-1 ERP system to replace the E-Fin Finance system, cash receipting and stores applications.
- Used robotics to extract 350,000 invoices and purchase orders from the old finance system
- Used Robotics to correct 40,000 records in the Uniform system.
- Gained national exemplar status for the HM Land Registry Land Charges project to migrate all local land charges data to the national HMLR Digital Register.
- Replaced virtual PC environment with physical laptops.

**HR**

- Started a programme of Institute of Learning and Management courses for senior and middle managers.
- Delivered a new end to end self-serve technical system for recruitment.
- Joined the Coaching and Mentoring pool with West Midlands Employers.
- Continue to build and maintain good employee relations through collaborative working with the Trade Unions at both a local and regional level.
- Coordinating and supporting the implementation of workforce planning across the organisation.
- Developed a draft Agile Working policy.
- Supporting implementation of Agile Working.
- Conducted a full staff survey.
- Implemented a corporate training programme including delivery of training in HR and health and safety.
- Reviewed a number of employment policies with further reviews scheduled.
- Developed a new Social Media policy
- Developed a new Training and Development policy

**Policy, Equalities and Engagement**

- Developed a new Equality Strategy 2022-2026 to set the direction of equality work for the next four years. Ensuring the Council meets its duty under the Equality Act of preparing and publishing equality objectives every four years.
- Supported twelve local organisations through the Bromsgrove Equality Small Grants scheme to support community activities. The scheme continues to attract new organisations with seven of the twelve being new applicants.



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

- The Catshill and Rubery Community Builders supporting the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) work is making a positive impact in communities. The Engagement team are providing support to a group that includes Councillors, the voluntary sector and Worcestershire County Council ABCD Team. The group share experiences, provide support, advice and links that help in the delivery of their work.
- Supported the successful delivery of the Holocaust Memorial day activities earlier this year.
- Successfully designed and delivered the Community Survey in late 2021. Analysed and shared the results with CMT, Cabinet and officers and made them publicly available on the website.
- Conducted fifteen community engagement surveys with the public covering a range of topics including:
  - Community safety
  - Feelings and views on Covid-19
  - Climate change
  - Street Theatre events
  - Leisure and events
  - Cashless carparking
  - Shopmobility
  - Local bus shelter replacement
  - Annual Community Survey

The results of these surveys have been used to support decisions, policy development, service changes and/or provide feedback.

- Delivered the annual Worcestershire Regulatory Service (WRS) staff survey and shared the results with the service managers.
- Continued data support for the Regional Coordination Group (RCG) who are a joined up working group analysing data during and post Covid19.
- Increased participation in the Bromsgrove Community Panel, a list of Bromsgrove residents who have agreed to participate in council engagement and consultations. Last year an additional 159 people joined the panel and it currently stands at 366 people.
- Implementing MS Power BI dashboard to provide an interactive data visualisation platform with a primary focus on business intelligence. This will complement the current measures dashboard and ultimately replace it.

**Business Improvement**

- Delivered an updated Project Management Framework and provided training for 100 managers and team leaders in project planning.
- Established a project monitoring process for CMT to provide oversight of corporate projects.
- Supporting CMT/SMT to embed the business planning cycle to align service delivery against budget pressures and council priorities.
- Supporting the Culture Group with data and insight to develop cross working activities to align culture with council priorities.
- Facilitated workshops and away days to focus on culture mapping, workstream flows and action planning.
- Providing project assurance on a number of improvement initiatives including corporate complaints and out of hours services.





**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

**Anticipated Activities/Key Milestones For Next Period**

**ICT**

- Develop a Cyber Security Strategy.
- Assess ways to reduce the carbon footprint of the server room in line with the Carbon Reduction Strategy actions.
- Introduce a customer portal on our website to support self-service of council functions such as environmental services requests.
- Implement a test schedule for disaster recovery with all departments.
- Test Windows 11 on our infrastructure.
- Automate the Freedom of Information (FOI) requests process where possible. Use machine learning to understand, interpret and pass the request to the correct services for a response.

**HR**

- Develop a People Strategy.
- Further develop the self-serve recruitment module to automate the process as much as possible.
- Further develop workforce planning across the organisation and draft a Workforce Plan.
- Continue to review and update employment policies.

**Policy, Equalities and Engagement**

- Plan and conduct the next Community Survey.
- Refresh the Performance Strategy.
- Further develop the performance dashboard.
- Further develop the quarterly performance reports for the organisation.

**Business Improvement**

- Support service managers to deliver key improvement actions within their service business plans. Deliver facilitation sessions to ensure action plans, SMART measures and project plans are in place.
- Support the delivery of change initiatives resulting from the business planning cycle.

**Partnership working:**

- Partnership working to deliver the covid vaccination continues with partners and organisation being able to join outreach events.
- The Redditch and Bromsgrove Learning Network and ABCD Guides Community of Practice Group has been set up to progress and share the ABCD work within Bromsgrove and across the county.

**5. Good News Stories and Awards (if applicable)**

- Exemplar status for the HMLR Land Charges project as detailed above. Every month we are externally assessed by our national Hub run by Geoplace (LGA /Ordnance Survey). In April we were awarded Gold standard for the year.
- Public Sector Network security audit certificate awarded for the year.



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

**6. Other (including risks, opportunities, issues not raised elsewhere).**

None

**Democratic Services and Elections**

**1. Update on Strategic Purposes**

**Key activities since last report:**

**Democratic Services – Key Activities**

The Democratic Services team is an enabling service with an integral role in Council governance. The work of the team, facilitating Committee meetings and managing the decision-making process, enables decisions to be taken that support all of the authority's strategic purposes and priorities. The work of Democratic Services is also crucial to the Council's internal priority of service sustainability because, if the decision-making process was to be disrupted, this could also delay delivery of important Council plans and activities.

Over the last 18 months, the Democratic Services team has facilitated the Council's decision-making process throughout a period of significant change and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. During the 2020/21 municipal year, meetings could be held remotely under the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020. However, since 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021, Councils have been required to hold formal Committee meetings in person, with elected Members required to physically attend meetings in order to participate in the debate and vote on items. This return to meetings in person occurred initially in a context in which legal restrictions remained in place on gatherings indoors. The arrangements for the return to meetings in person were thoroughly risk assessed and determined by the Corporate Management Team (CMT), with social distancing and mask wearing required alongside other measures designed to mitigate against the risks of Covid transmission. Mitigating actions have changed over time, in line with Government guidance and advice from the Council's Senior Health and Safety Advisor, and meetings continue to be risk assessed.

Whilst there is a legal requirement for elected Members to attend formal Committee meetings in person, this requirement does not extend to officers (with some exceptions). To help limit the number of people in the meeting rooms at any one time, thereby helping to reduce the risks of Covid transmission, the Democratic Services team worked closely with the Facilities and ICT teams to introduce hybrid meeting arrangements, whereby Officers could attend meetings remotely, via Microsoft Teams, to present reports. Technical solutions have been identified to enable hybrid meetings to proceed.



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

Whilst officers are now free to choose whether to attend meetings in person or remotely, remote attendance by officers at meetings has also helped to reduce the numbers of people travelling to attend Committee meetings, resulting in a reduction in carbon emissions, which supports the Council's work on tackling climate change and the green thread.

The legal requirement to hold meetings in person does not extend to informal meetings. Therefore, the Democratic Services team have arranged for informal and private meetings, such as Chairmen's Briefings, Member training and Task Group meetings, to take place remotely on Microsoft Teams. This has ensured that Council business continues to be considered efficiently and in a timely manner, making use of available technological options whilst providing Members and Officers with the flexibility to participate in meetings from various locations. This approach to holding informal meetings also supports the Council's work on the green thread, by reducing carbon emissions associated with travel to and from informal meetings by attendees.

**Elections – Key Activities**

- Electoral Services Officer, Claire Beaumont achieved her Certificate in Electoral Administration furthering depth of knowledge in the Elections Team
- The team are currently carrying out the canvass in Bromsgrove:
  - Initial canvass communications sent out in July
  - Reminders sent out w/c 22 August
  - Personal canvass will run from 21 September to 4 November

**Legal Services – Key Activities**

The Principal Solicitor and Deputy Monitoring Officer retired from the Council on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2022. Officers are in the process of reviewing the role and support provided by the service to ensure that the Council can continue to deliver key projects and the authority's strategic purposes.

**Anticipated Activities/Key Milestones For Next Period**

**Democratic Services**

Over the next 12 months the Democratic Services team will be preparing the induction process for Members due to be elected in May 2023. This will involve consulting with and acting on directions provided by Members at meetings of the Member Development Steering Group in respect of induction arrangements. The effective delivery of training, particularly to new Members, will be important to ensure the sustainability of the democratic process and good governance moving forward.

The Democratic Services team are also in the process of reviewing the technical support required to facilitate hybrid meetings. As part of this process, meeting 'owls', which provide video images and audio from a meeting room, are in the process of being tested at meetings of Cabinet and the



**Portfolio Holder Report – Finance and Enabling**

Overview and Scrutiny Board. The outcomes of these tests will be discussed by the Constitution Review Working Group. There will be a further test in due course at a meeting of Council to ensure that the equipment can support the needs of larger meetings. This equipment should help to ensure that hybrid meeting arrangements can be organised as efficiently as possible at the Council. Subject to the successful implementation of these tests, this equipment could also be used for future meetings that may be live streamed at the Council, as requested by Members at recent meetings.

**Elections**

Will soon be starting preparation work for all out District and Parish Elections in Bromsgrove.

**Legal Services**

In the interim period, a temporary officer has been appointed as Principal Lawyer and Deputy Monitoring Officer to ensure continuity in the provision of important legal support across Council services.

**Partnership working:**

The Council works with a range of partner organisations to meet the needs of residents and businesses in the District.

**Democratic Services – Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) Board**

Bromsgrove District Council, as the host for WRS, also hosts meetings of the WRS Board which makes decisions in relation to the shared service. These meetings are attended by representatives of all of the district Councils in Worcestershire. The Democratic Services team has continued to facilitate meetings of the Board throughout the pandemic, ensuring compliance with the requirements detailed in the Service Level Agreement (SLA) between partner organisations, including on the timing of the annual meeting of the Board and in relation to the budget setting meeting. Whilst elected Members have to attend meetings of the Board in person, many officers can attend remotely and hybrid meeting arrangements, enabling officers from partner authorities to attend meetings remotely on Microsoft Teams, have been facilitated by the Democratic Services team.

**2. Good News Stories and Awards (if applicable)**

None

**3. Other (including risks, opportunities, issues not raised elsewhere).**

None