

Report to the Council

Subject: Finance and Technology Portfolio

Date: 22 April 2014

Portfolio Holder: Councillor S Stavrou

Recommending:

That the report of the Finance & Technology Portfolio Holder be noted

Accountancy

Since our last meeting the Chancellor of the Exchequer has delivered his Budget. The Budget contained several measures that will have some impact on Local Authorities but thankfully there was no further reduction in grant funding for local government. In fact whilst the theme of austerity to tackle the deficit in the public finances was still present there were some increases in spending. The Chancellor announced a fund of £200 million across the UK for a pot holes challenge fund and £140 million of additional funding to repair and restore the condition of flood defences.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy approved as part of the Council's budget in February did allow for reductions in funding in future years and these estimates will be re-evaluated as more information becomes available. Over a number of years our prudent financial management has put the Council in a strong position and this will allow us to manage whatever adjustments are necessary in a structured and controlled manner.

Benefits

The Welfare Reform programme also featured in the Budget and it was interesting to see the introduction of a welfare spending cap for the years 2015-16 to 2018-19. For 2015-16 the level of the cap has been set at £119.5 billion. A margin of 2% above the forecast of the Office for Budget Responsibility has been allowed to prevent any disproportionate actions being triggered by small fluctuations. It is hoped that the economic recovery continues and so this problem will not arise.

The year-end position on the key performance indicators will be considered at the June meeting of the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel, but I will take this opportunity to give a brief update. The average time taken on processing a new claim was 23 days, which is significantly ahead of the target of 30 days and the previous year's performance of 31.83 days. The other processing indicator is for changes of circumstance. These were also showing an improving trend, the average of 4.58 days compares favourably against the target of 6 days and last year's figure of 5.86 days.

Revenues

This is always a very busy time of year for staff in both Benefits and Revenues as the new-year bills and notifications generate a lot of calls and correspondence. The peak

last year caused by the introduction of Local Support for Council Tax has been replaced this year by enquiries on non-domestic rates following the introduction of the retail relief scheme. As always, help and advice is being offered to support both residents and businesses that are facing changes in their bills.

The key performance indicators at the end of the year are positive for both Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates. At the end of March the in-year collection rate for Council Tax was 97.62% which was well ahead of the target of 96.60%. Similarly, Non-Domestic Rates was also ahead of the target of 97.50% with 98.09% having been collected.

Performance Management

Key Performance Indicators

As mentioned above, outturn performance against the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for 2013/14 will be reported to the next cycle of meetings of the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee and Scrutiny Panel. It is hoped that the high level of performance seen for the third quarter of the year, where 80% of the indicators achieved the relevant cumulative target, will have been continued to year-end.

The relevance of the KPI set for each year is reviewed at the end of the third quarter of each preceding year, and this exercise has recently been completed for 2014/15. The Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee has agreed a range of proposed KPIs and targets for this year, including the principle of a new indicator to monitor telephone response times, following the implementation of the Council's new telephony system. Performance against the KPIs will continue to be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

Key Objectives

The annual identification of key objectives provides an opportunity for the Council to focus attention on how areas for improvement will be addressed, opportunities exploited and better outcomes delivered over the coming year. The key objectives are intended to provide a clear statement of the Council's overall priorities for each year, and are supported by a range of actions and deliverables designed to achieve specific outcomes.

The key objectives for 2014/15 will be considered by the Cabinet on 7 April 2014. The objectives reflect national and local priorities and specific service challenges. In accordance with the recent review of current overview and scrutiny arrangements, the Leader of the Council will present the key objectives to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the first meeting of the new municipal year, and progress in relation to individual actions and deliverables will also be reviewed each quarter.

Technology

Telephone switch replacement project

The Civic offices rollout of the new telephone system is now complete. Work continues to finalise the conversion of the satellite offices to enable the termination of the expensive analogue lines. Completion is anticipated by the end of April.

Wireless coverage

The site wide wireless solution is now live and can be used by staff, visitors and Councillors. Any Members requiring wireless access to the internet should contact Democratic Services for a password.

Engage mobile application

Engage is an exciting new mobile application (app) which will allow residents to pay bills direct from a tablet or smartphone and be the first to receive news as soon as it is published. The Engage app gives our residents the convenience to pay their rent, council tax or parking fine at a time suitable for them. Engage also keeps them up-to-date with what is happening locally with news feeds and links to our social media. This innovative and customer-friendly app has been developed in partnership with Capita and can be downloaded from the App Store or Google Play. It will be promoted on the Council Website during this month.