

**Resources and Personnel Portfolio Holder
Councillor Greg Marshall
Report to Council – 11 October 2023**

Finance Services Update**Audit of the Statement of Accounts**

After reporting the financial outturn to Cabinet on 4 July 2023, the draft Statement of Accounts for 2022/23 was produced and published on the Council's website. The accounts are currently being scrutinised by Mazars, the Council's external auditors, with the audit expected to conclude in the autumn and the accounts signed off by 30 November 2023. In the meantime, regular updates will be provided to the Governance, Audit and Standards Committee.

Launch of Budget Setting 2024/25

The Deputy Chief Executive, as the Council's Section 151 Officer, has recently launched the budget setting process for 2024/25. Officers are now busy preparing new business plans, revenue and capital budgets and reviewing their lists of fees and charges.

The proposed business plans and financial estimates will be scrutinised by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 and 30 January 2024, in advance of consideration at Cabinet on 6 February 2024 with a final recommendation onto Full Council to approve the budget on 6 March 2024.

Medium Term Financial Strategy and Business Strategy

Cabinet will shortly be considering the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and looking to approve the refreshed Business Strategy for 2024/25.

As reported previously, there was an underspend of £2.1m on the General Fund revenue budget in 2022/23. This was due to a variety of underspends, additional income, budget carry forwards, changes in provisions, government grants and effective financial management across the Council. Overall, after transfers to and from earmarked reserves, there was a net withdrawal of £1.0m from balances resulting in a closing General Fund Reserve of £6.4m as at 31 March 2023.

The latest MTFS will show that the Council continues to experience significant budgetary pressures that will impact on its 2023/24 and 2024/25 budgets. These include the cost of pay awards, high price inflation including the rising cost of energy and fuel and construction costs, also linked to issues with the supply chains.

Further details, including the refreshed Business Strategy to identify potential revenue savings and additional growth and income to meet the projected budget gap, will be presented to Cabinet on 7 November 2023.

This is inevitably going to be another challenging budget round, particularly with the impact of high inflation and the cost of living crisis on Council budgets and with

uncertainties surrounding what extra central government funding support may be made available to local authorities. Officers will continue to review the situation as part of the budget setting process and update the MTFS accordingly.

Budget Consultation

Cabinet recently agreed the content of the Budget Consultation for 2024/25. The survey includes questions relating to a resident's method of access of Council services, the preferred means of interaction with the Council and the impact of the ongoing cost of living crisis.

The web-based questionnaire, which is open until 26 November 2023, is being promoted through social media, 'email-me' bulletins, press releases, website and direct engagement with those on the Council's stakeholder map. All responders will be entered into a prize draw.

The Council received a good level of response last year and is looking for similar levels of public engagement again to feed into the latest budget round.

Revenues, Benefits, Quality and Control and Customer Services

Revenues

The Revenues Team are responsible for the administration of Council Tax and Business Rates, including the recovery of these.

Council Tax is collected by Broxtowe Borough Council on behalf of the main major precepting authorities, Nottinghamshire County Council, Nottinghamshire Police and Crime Commissioner, Nottinghamshire Fire and Broxtowe Borough Council as well as the Parish Councils. In 23/24, the net charge is £79.9m, with 8% of this being retained by Broxtowe.

Business Rates is a significant income generator for the Council with us being able to retain 40% of the amounts collected (with limits imposed by Central Government), with the remaining amounts being split between central government, NCC and Nottinghamshire Fire. A business is evaluated on its Rateable Value, as determined by the valuation office agency. This council now collects over £28m in business rates. The Council Tax collection rate for 2022/23 was 97.4%, an improvement of over 0.4% on the previous year. Business Rates collection rate was 98.7%, an improvement over 1.2% on the previous year. The Current collection rates are reported on a quarterly basis and showing an improvement on 2022/23 in both Council Tax and Business Rates.

Benefits

The Benefits Team are responsible for the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support. Both of these are designed to support the most vulnerable in our community. With the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) we have seen a reduction on the number of Housing Benefit claims processed, however, most of those receiving UC will still be required to apply for assistance on Council Tax Support.

The Department for Works and Pensions have written to the Council to advise them of their intention to accelerate the roll out of UC to a managed migration of those on Housing Benefit in 2024/24. Although, there are limitations on certain categories of households that will migrate.

Performance in Benefits continues to be in the upper quartile of the Country.

Quality and Control

Quality and Control are a small team that is responsible for the recovery of Sundry Debtors, Housing Benefit Overpayments and the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's).

DHP's are to assist those receiving Housing Benefit or the Housing Element of Universal Credit and experiencing hardship. This pot of money is received by Central Government but is reducing year on year. This year's balance is £88k, which is equivalent to the 2022/23 amount but lower than previous years. Nottinghamshire County Council have awarded a further £28k that the Council can add to the DHP fund through their allocation of Household Support Fund.

Customer Services

The Customer Services Team is responsible for handling phone calls and face to face interviews for the following 7 services as well as the switchboard. Outside of these, it is the responsibility of the back office team:

- Council Tax
- Housing Benefits & Council Tax Support
- Business Rates
- Housing Rents
- Grounds Maintenance
- Street Cleansing
- Refuse

The Council receives over 100,000 telephone calls / year (on average 380 per day), as well as an average of 200 switchboard calls. In addition to this, they provide a reception service at the Beeston Council Offices as well as seeing customers face to face with more detailed queries regarding the services above.

In July 2023, the Customer Services Team started the transition of Housing Repairs calls from Customer Services to a dedicated Housing Repairs Contact Centre. The Customer Services Team continues to provide support to the Housing Repairs Team during this transition period to ensure optimum performance.

The Customer Services Team have recently had a number of new Officers join the team and they have adapted well to the services provided. This new resource, in line with budget, has created an improved performance position. The main Key Performance Indicator for Customer Services is the number of abandoned calls as a percentage of calls received. In August, this was 10.3% against a target of 10%. This

is expected to continue to improve over the coming months with the new Officers continuing to develop their knowledge and skills.

Communications and Engagement

Email Me Service

The Council's Email Me Service continues to grow as an easy and convenient way for residents to receive information about Council services and conduct their business with us. At the end of August 27,686 residents were signed up to the service, where they can subscribe to a range of topics of their choice including Latest News, Jobs, Business Updates, Parks and Open Spaces and Environment updates. It is also used to share the Council's weekly Employee Briefing and monthly Member Briefing, Members Matters. Residents can sign up at www.broxtowe.gov.uk/emailme

Website Ranking

Having moved up from third to second place in the previous quarter, the Council's website is now ranked in first place in the Sitemorse rankings. The rankings assess all local authority websites on a series of factors which make it easy to use for residents, as well as its adherence to accessibility legislation to enable those with disabilities to use the website effectively.

Communications and Marketing Projects

Recent projects undertaken by the Communications Team include:

- Disability Forum – The team have been working in partnership with local residents from the Disability Forum to refresh the group and attract new members to collaborate on projects with the Council, as well as provide feedback and insight on Council services and initiatives through the eyes of the disabled community.
- Let's Talk Broxtowe Consultation – following the conclusion of the Borough wide consultation to help inform the Council's priorities over the next four years, the team have analysed 820 responses to identify trends and key issues which will be used by Senior Officers to develop the new Corporate Plan document.
- Climate Change – As well supporting the promotion of the Green Festival, the team continues to produce proactive communications content to increase uptake of the Council's Green Rewards platform to encourage behaviour change to reduce our carbon footprint. The team are now working on a project to target specific groups on climate change to overcome some of the barriers to engagement.
- Cultural Services – Supporting the wider Communications, Cultural and Civic Services Team to improve the marketing and promotion of the D.H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum and wide ranging cultural offer of the Borough as a means to improve health and wellbeing, education, anti-social behaviour and economic growth outcomes.

Civic Office

Following the Civic Service, which took place at the newly opened Plessey Centre last month, work in the Civic Office is focused on a number of upcoming events, including:

- Beeston Remembrance Parade
- Broxtowe Volunteer Awards
- Freeman and Alderman Ceremony
- Holocaust Memorial Day Service

HR Update

Broxtowe has been nominated for Employer of the Year at the National Apprenticeship Awards 2023. We have been nominated by one of existing apprentices and we have been shortlisted for the Finalists stage for the East Midlands Region. This is excellent news and our HR and Apprenticeships Officer, Charlotte Nicholls has worked with Managers and Departments to make our Apprenticeships Programme a success. In addition, Broxtowe has also been shortlisted at the Derbyshire & Nottinghamshire Apprenticeship Awards for Diversity & Inclusion and Large Employer Categories. Winners to be announced in October.

Recruitment

We have recently successfully recruited to a number of hard to fill posts across the Council with support from Members.

- Head of Asset Management and Development
- Capital Works Manager
- Estates Officer
- Health & Safety and Emergency Planning Manager
- Health & Safety Officer
- Licensing Manager

A number of roles have been recruited to within the Business Support function following retirements of employees with over 80 years' collective experience in the Admin section.

Mental Health

The Mental Health Employee Champions have arranged a number of activities to support World Mental Health Day on Tuesday 10 October. This will include raising awareness of what mental health support is available both internally and externally. The theme for this year is 'Mental Health is a universal human right'.

Apprenticeships

There are currently 10 apprenticeships in progress, across Housing, Garage, Business Support, HR, IT, Capital Works, Audit and Leadership.

Additional Apprenticeship posts within Economic Development, Horticulture and Finance is also in the pipeline.

National Pay Award Negotiations

The Council is currently awaiting progress on strike ballot held by GMB Union. Despite Unison and Unite's strike ballot being unsuccessful, GMB have decided to still go to ballot and have only just opened this – 12 September to 24 October. We will await further information from the LGA. The pay offer is £1925 as per the 2022/2023 award.

Learning and Development

The HR Manager is currently delivering a Coaching and Mentoring Programme to a small number of Senior Managers looking for career development coaching. This follows a successful programme delivered throughout 2022 to six Heads of Service. The coaching programme is available to any Senior Managers or aspiring Managers for the future and delivered on a 121 basis, bespoke to the individuals' needs.

The Learning and Development Team will be facilitating another Institute of Leadership and Management course for employees looking to gain an ILM qualification at Level 3 or Level 5. This follows the highly successful programme last year where 13 employees successfully gained the qualification across different departments in the Council.

Administrative Services

Annual Canvass

The annual canvass to update the register of electors started in August. E-communications have been used to encourage early responses and to reduce the number of paper forms posted out. The visits to those properties which have not responded to the initial and reminder letters is taking place until 24 October. The revised register will be published on 1 December.

Polling District and Polling Place Review

A review of polling districts and polling places is currently being undertaken. The review will aim to ensure that polling districts and polling places are still appropriate and meet the needs of electors. Details of the proposed changes which have been put out for consultation are available on the website. These include comments and suggested alterations made following the elections in May. I would encourage you to look at the changes, particularly those relating to polling places, and pass any comments on to Electoral Services, including any suggestions for alternative locations for polling stations.