

Portfolio for Resources and Personnel Policy Councillor G Marshall

Report to Council – 9 October 2024

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, such as Nottinghamshire County Council, Nottinghamshire Police and Crime Commissioner and Nottinghamshire Fire as well as the Parish Councils. In 2023/24, 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 2023/24 was 97.6%, an improvement of over 0.2% on the previous year. Business Rates collection rate was 97.6. The projected collection rates on both Council Tax and Business Rates is in line with the target.

Benefits

The Benefits Team is 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 role out of Universal Credit has increased during 2023/24 and as a result the number of Housing Benefit cases continue to reduce. The Benefits team was restructured in December 2023 in preparation of this and has managed this migration well and performance in Benefits continues to be in the upper quartile of the Country.

Quality and Control

Q&C is 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 2023/24 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 (HSF). It has recently been announced that a further phase of HSF will be provided. It is expected that a further £28k will be provided to support the DHP pot. However, this requires ratification from Nottinghamshire County Council Members.

Customer Services

The Customer Services Team is responsible for handling phone calls and face to face interviews for the following 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 per annum (an average of 380 per day), as well as an average of 200 switchboard calls. In addition to this, they provide a reception service at the Council Offices in Beeston as well as seeing customers face to face.

The main Key Performance Indicator for Customer Services is the number of abandoned calls as a percentage of calls received. In the latest rolling year, September 2023 to August 2024, the Customer Services Team have achieved an abandonment rate of 9.13% which is significantly improved from previous years and exceeds the target of 10%.

Finance Services Update

Audit of the Statement of Accounts

After reporting the financial outturn to Cabinet on 23 July 2024, the draft Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 was produced and published on the Council's website. The accounts will be scrutinised by Forvis Mazars, the Council's appointed external auditors, with the audit expected to conclude in November.

In terms of the previous year, Forvis Mazars have concluded their audit work and issued an unqualified opinion on the 2022/23 accounts. The auditors have also completed their work in respect of the Value for Money conclusion for the year ended 31 March 2023 having considered the adequacy of the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. Again it was pleasing that Forvis Mazars did not identify any significant weaknesses that would

require it to make a recommendation. Further details were provided in the Auditors Annual Report to the recent Governance, Audit and Standards Committee.

Launch of Budget Setting 2025/26

The Deputy Chief Executive, as the Council's designated Section 151 Officer, has recently launched the budget setting process for 2025/26. Officers are now busy preparing new business plans, revenue and capital budgets and reviewing the lists of fees and charges.

The proposed business plans and financial estimates will be scrutinised by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20 and 21 January 2025, in advance of consideration at Cabinet on 4 February 2025 with a final recommendation onto Council to approve the budget on 5 March 2025.

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 2025/26.

As reported previously, there was an underspend of £1.8m on the General Fund revenue budget in 2023/24. 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 £326k from balances resulting in a closing General Fund Reserve of £6.1m as at 31 March 2024.

The latest MTFS will show that the Council continues to experience significant budgetary pressures that will impact on its 2024/25 and 2025/26 budgets. These include the cost of pay awards and price inflation, including the cost of energy, fuel, construction and other supplies.

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 5 November 2024.

This is inevitably going to be another challenging budget round, particularly with the impact of inflation and the significant pressures on local government finances. 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 2025/26. The survey includes questions relating to a resident's opinion on Council services, methods of access to these services, the preferred means of interaction with the Council, the impact of the ongoing cost of living crisis, climate change and digital strategy. The web-based questionnaire, which is open until 14 November 2024, 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 an encouraging level of response last year and is looking for similar levels of public engagement again to feed into the latest budget round.

Complaints and Compliments

Regular Complaints and Compliments reports have started to be submitted to Cabinet quarterly in accordance with the new Complaints Policy, in addition to the reports being submitted to the Governance, Audit and Standards Committee. This enables a wide-range of cross-party Members to consider complaints submitted to the Council in a Committee forum. The reports detailed recommendations from the Complaints and Compliments Officer to the service areas on areas where improvements should be made.

The Housing Ombudsman (HO) has introduced a new portal to enable local authorities to communicate with the HO and provide updates on ongoing complaints. Broxtowe's Complaints and Compliments Officer has been asked by the HO to work with other Council's nationwide to assist them with their use of the system because of the expertise he has displayed using the new Portal.

Human Resources and Learning & Development

National Pay Award Negotiations

The 2023/24 Local Government Pay Award has still not yet been agreed, with the Trade Unions request for £1,925 increase as per previous years being rejected by the National Employers. A counter-offer of £1,290 has been tabled as a full and final offer, and Unison and Unite are currently balloting members on industrial action. Unison's ballot runs from 4 September to 16 October, whilst Unite's runs from 30 August until 15 October.

Learning and Development

The Council's rolling Institute of Leadership and Management course commences in October. Fourteen employees will be undertaking certificates in Level 3 and Level 5 in Leadership and Management. Six employees have completed their Level 5 qualification from the previous course, with a further ten still undertaking their assignments.

The HR Team continues to deliver it's rolling programme of support to Managers, providing face to face training sessions covering Probation, Capability, Attendance Management, Disciplinary, Annual Leave along with additional support relating to managing bereavement in the workplace and how to support employees.

Professional qualifications continue to be supported with employees undertaking courses such as Health and Safety (NEBOSH), Learning and Development (Diploma in Learning and Organisational Development) and Association of Electoral Administrators (certificate).

An Introduction to Trauma training was delivered to officers across all departments in July, giving an overview of how trauma may impact us and further, more in-depth

trauma training is being arranged for front-line employees within our Communities and Housing Teams to provide knowledge, practical advice and resilience.

The Learning and Development Co-ordinator continues to deliver one on one e-learning sessions with new colleagues in Housing Repairs on a regular basis.

Work Experience

Throughout July and August, the Council welcomed eight Work Experience students, including a longer-term placement within the HR Team. Departments included Planning and Economic Development, Bramcote Crematorium, HR/Learning and Development, Legal and Housing.

The longer-term HR placement came via Futures Group Nottingham, who assist people back into work who may have experienced mental health difficulties or disabilities. The student attended for around three months, twice a week and assisted with valuable research projects such as a policy on Adoption Leave. The HR Team assisted with CV writing, interview skills and career development during the placement.

Apprenticeships

The Council has been shortlisted for another award for its Apprenticeships Programme – the Social Justice Employer of the Year at the National Apprenticeship and Skills Awards 2024. The Social Justice Employer of the Year Award recognises employers who can demonstrate their commitment in creating opportunities and support packages for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

Charlotte Nicholls, the Council's HR and Apprenticeships Officer has recently become Chair of the East Midlands Area Apprenticeship Network, continuing to promote the Council's profile both regionally and nationally.

The Council currently has seventeen apprenticeship courses being undertaken, with a further four in the pipeline. 42 Apprenticeship courses have been run since the inception of the Apprenticeship Levy.

Other News

The Portfolio holder chaired a Member-led recruitment panel for the new Head of Asset Management and Development vacancy on 6 September, with an excellent candidate, being successfully appointed. The candidate comes from Bassetlaw District Council and has over 20 years' experience in operational and strategic property management within the public and private sector.

The Council's new Head of Health and Safety, Compliance and Emergency Planning commenced her role on 3 September joining us from Nova Education Trust, whilst the new Head of ICT and Corporate Services joined us on 15 July from Rushcliffe BC.

The Human Resources Team continues to have a weekly presence at Kimberley Depot, every Wednesday from 5.30 a.m. to support our front-line colleagues.

The HR Team introduced a 'Wellbeing Passport' to support Managers and employees and ensure that specific support is recorded and maintained regularly. The Wellbeing Passport is designed to support employees who have a physical or mental health condition/disability. It can also be used to support neurodivergent employees and those who may have additional needs that may not fall under a specific condition or disability. It aims to ensure you have access to the relevant support that you may need in the workplace and that everyone has a clear record of what adjustments have been agreed. Training sessions were delivered to Managers to provide practical advice on completing the form. This initiative ensures that the Council continues its duty of care to employees and ensures that new initiatives are being introduced following our Disability Confident Leader award.

Communications and Engagement

Tour of Britain

For the first time the Tour of Britain came through Eastwood, Brinsley and Greasley on Friday 6 September and the Communications Team helped support sharing event information to encourage residents to come out and cheer on the cyclists during Stage 4.

Budget Consultation

Preparations have been made ready to launch the Budget Consultation to our residents this month to ensure that as many of our residents have the opportunity to respond to this as possible, so that we can hear what residents want to see from us as a Council in the new financial year.

Corporate Plan

The Communications Team are working on some upcoming roadshows as part of the launch of the new Corporate Plan in locations across the Borough, where residents can attend in person to learn more about our priorities and how we are going to deliver these over the next 4 years.

You Said, We Did

The team have continued to work on the improving perceptions project following last year's feedback from the Budget Consultation. Messages are being shared twice a week on You Said, We Did – showing residents where we have listened to their feedback and what we have done with this. A couple of recent examples include:

You said: Use parks and open spaces for more events.

We did: We have utilised local green spaces to host events across Broxtowe like:

- The Green Festival in Coronation Park, Eastwood
- Live Music as part of Broxtowe Creates Festival at Kimberley Miners Recreation Ground
- Hemlock Happening at Bramcote Hills Park
- Pop Up Proms at Inham Nook Recreation Ground, Chilwell
- Play Days in Parks across the Borough

You said: Develop community led initiatives to support people with mental health issues and loneliness.

We did: £1,000 from the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Funding has been used to support Warm Spaces and Place of Welcome initiatives. This will help to support social inclusion and keep people warm over winter.

Communications and Marketing Projects

Recent projects undertaken by the Communications Team include:

- Environment – Helped support the annual Parks and Open Spaces Survey, achieving 450 responses which was higher than last year's figures. The Communications Team are also working with the Environment Team on the Brinsley Headstocks Project Group and will be launching a new recycling campaign in October as part of Recycle Week to help increase recycling and reduce contamination rates.
- Economic Development – The announcement of the works starting at Hickings Lane Recreation Ground for the demolition and start of the new community pavilion, and further developments over the next few months on the Stapleford Towns Fund project, Kimberley Means Business and UKSPF.

Civic Office

The Mayor of Broxtowe marked Nottinghamshire Day and Merchant Navy Day over the last couple of months with a flag raising in Beeston Square.

The Civic Office have been working with The Mayor to organise her Civic Service taking place on Sunday 6 October at The Haven Church in Stapleford. The service will be focussed around community with the addition of the community choir from Pulp Friction, a charity which helps support learning disabled and autistic people across Nottingham.

The Civic Team are also busy making preparations for the annual Remembrance Parade taking place on Sunday 10 November in Beeston at the war memorial. Working with the army from Chetwynd Barracks and local uniformed youth organisations to be part of the parade.