

Portfolio for Resources and Personnel Policy Councillor G Marshall

Report to Council – 11 December 2024

Finance Services Update

Audit of the Statement of Accounts

The draft Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 are published on the Council's website at [Annual Accounts : Broxtowe Borough Council](#). The accounts are being scrutinised by the appointed external auditors, Forvis Mazars. Whilst the audit is progressing well, the auditors are not yet in a position to present their Audit Completion Report. This is likely to follow in January, with Broxtowe being in a similar position to the other district councils across the county.

Forvis Mazars has not indicated any significant findings from its audit testing to date and an update was presented to Governance, Audit and Standards Committee on 25 November 2024. The aim remains to achieve a clean and unqualified audit opinion on the accounts.

Business Planning and Budget Setting 2025/26

The production of business plans and the budget setting process for 2025/26 is well underway. Officers are 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.

This is inevitably going to be another challenging budget round. The latest Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), presented to Cabinet on 5 November 2024, showed that the Council continues to experience significant budgetary pressures. These include the cost of pay awards and price inflation on energy, fuel, construction and other supplies. The MTFS identified a potential budget gap of £1.8m for 2025/26, although this projection assumed only limited additional financial support being received from central government. The refreshed Business Strategy identified £950k of additional growth and income and potential efficiency savings to meet the projected shortfall.

Following the new Chancellor's Autumn Statement in October, we are awaiting the details in the local government financial settlement nearer to Christmas. Officers will continue to review the situation as part of the budget setting process and update the MTFS accordingly.

Budget Consultation

The Budget Consultation for 2025/26 has recently concluded and, once again, there has been an encouraging level of public engagement with almost 1,300 responses. The survey, which included questions relating to a resident's opinion on Council services, was actively promoted through the usual channels, with responders that chose to be, being entered into a prize draw. The results of the survey are being considered for the latest budget round, with the outcomes due to be presented in a report to Cabinet in early January.

Internal Audit

A slight revision to the Internal Audit Plan was considered at Governance, Audit and Standards Committee on 25 November 2024. Internal Audit work remains focussed on higher-risk areas, including key financial systems, which are integral to the Council's service delivery. The Chief Audit and Control Officer was keen to ensure that key control frameworks within the systems remain robust and operational, particularly in light of well-publicised national issues relating to system integrity and fraud.

Revenues, Benefits, Quality & 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, the Council retains 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. The projected collection rates on both Council Tax and Business Rates is in line with the target.

Future changes - During the recent Autumn statement the Chancellor announced changes to the Business Rates discounts and multipliers. From 2025/26 the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure discount will reduce from 75% to 40%. This reduction will mean those businesses in that sector will have more business rates. However, those that have a Rateable Value under 50,000 will have their multiplier (that amount

against which their Rateable Value is calculated against) will be frozen at 49.90, the same rate since 2020.

In 2026/27, the number of multipliers used in calculations will increase from 2 to 6. This will create additional complications but is designed to ensure those big businesses support smaller businesses.

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) the Council has seen a reduction in the number of Housing Benefit claims processed; however, most of those receiving UC will still be required to apply for assistance through 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 for this and has managed the migration well, with performance in Benefits continuing to be in the upper quartile.

Current performance figures have the team processing New Applications in an average of under 9 days and change in circumstances in around 4 days. Both indicators are top quartile performance.

Future changes - The Department of Working Pensions (DWP) have written to the Council highlighting that they are starting preliminary work on establishing a plan to merge Housing Benefit in to Pension Credit. This is in its infancy and as it stands there are no proposed timeframes been shared with the Council.

Quality and Control

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 from 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 and an additional £28k has been provided to the Council. However, the number of applications for DHP has reduced in 2024/25. Work is being carried out to maximise the number of awards to ensure the maximum spend is achieved.

Future changes -No specific future changes highlighted.

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.

The main Key Performance Indicator for Customer Services is the number of abandoned calls as a percentage of calls received. The latest available figures are October 2024 in which the abandonment rate in Customer Services was 6.3% against a target of less than 10%.

Future changes- In line with Housing Repairs, the Customer Services Team have been evaluating different options in respect of a new Contact Centre telephone system. At the point of writing, there is a preferred supplier and further discussions are ongoing. Further updates will be provided regarding the system but it is anticipated that the new system will go live between January and April 2025.

Payroll and Job Evaluation

Payroll

The Payroll team manages three payrolls at the Council: Broxtowe Borough Council, Liberty Leisure and Broxtowe Elections. Payrolls for Broxtowe Borough Council and Liberty Leisure are processed every month paying over 700 employees. The Broxtowe Elections payroll is processed when required and can be for up to 400 workers.

On 23 October 2024, the pay award for 2024/25 was agreed with an effective date of 1 April 2024. The pay award increased all salary points at the council for grades 2 – 15 by £1,290 per annum. Grades CO1-CO5 received an increase of 2.5% on all salary points. The increase of 2.5% for grades CO1-CO5 represents the equivalent increase received at the top of grade 15 (point 74) for the pay award. In December 2024, all employees will receive their pay increase and relevant back pay for pay received since 1 April 2024. Employees on Universal Credit can opt to have their pay award back pay spread over 4 months. For someone in receipt of Universal

Credit, receiving a large back pay amount in one pay month can significantly impact their benefits for that given month. By allowing the spread of back pay an employee's Universal Credit payment may not be impacted as significantly.

Job Evaluation

The Job Evaluation team manages the GLPC job evaluation scheme for the Council. All jobs between grades 2-15 are evaluated using the GLPC scheme. Currently the Council has 251 job groups which are evaluated using the GLPC scheme. For any post graded CO1-CO5 the HAY scheme is used, via an external company called KornFerry. For more senior roles, the HAY scheme allows for a more detailed evaluation process.

Since January 2022 the Job Evaluation team and panel have undertaken a Council-wide review, evaluating all jobs at the Council. Less than five posts remain in need of evaluation. As of 30 September 2024, the additional salary costs (including on costs) incurred as a result of the review currently stands at £553,000. Since the review began in January 2022 the job evaluation panel have evaluated 473 posts with 213 posts increasing in grade. This represents an increase in pay for 45% of jobs at the Council. The initial phases of the review allowed for the removal of temporary market supplements by increasing the grades of these posts via the job evaluation scheme. This helped fill a number of vacant posts within key departments such as Planning, and Environmental Health.

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. Areas of potential improvement are included in the recommendations provided by the Complaints and Compliments Officer to the service areas.

The Council has currently received 222 Stage 1 complaints and 41 complaints were investigated under Stage 2 of the complaints procedure. Four were investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) or Housing Ombudsman (HO).

Under the Stage 2 complaints procedure, nine complaints were not upheld, 10 complaints were upheld. The Ombudsman investigated four complaints made against the Council in quarter 2, of which two were upheld and two were not upheld.

The Council has also received a total of 103 compliments in quarter 2.

ICT Services

There are several improvements being delivered this financial year to enhance the Council's security, availability, business continuity, and user experience. These improvements will provide efficiencies, and leverage benefits of existing investments.

Future Changes

Windows 11, Office 365, and Microsoft OneDrive will soon be deployed to all employees and Councillors who use corporate owned devices. These changes will provide greater flexibility for agile and remote working and increase system availability using the latest Cloud technologies Microsoft have to offer.

A new storage and computing environment designated to run Council systems and store data is being purchased to replace the existing solution. The replacement technology will reduce the Council's carbon footprint through power efficiencies, and provide additional layers of protection from cyber-attacks. It is anticipated that these enhancements will be delivered by the end of quarter 4.

Communications and Civic Services

Budget consultation

The Communications Team worked throughout November to promote the 2025/26 Budget Consultation sharing this across all social media channels, Email Me bulletins, local Facebook community groups and working with stakeholders such as Broxtowe Youth Voice, Citizens Advice Bureau, Sahara Asian Elders Group and Eastwood and District u3a – resulting in over 1,290 responses.

Severe Weather

Communications are being shared with residents regarding how they can be prepared for flooding following previous incidents such as storm Babet and Henk. Signposting residents to flooding alerts and how they can prepare themselves and their homes should a flood event happen.

Communications and Marketing Projects

Recent projects undertaken by the Communications Team include:

- Environment – The launch of our new Recycle It Right Campaign to help reduce contamination rates, by working with our refuse teams to get the right items in the right bins. The campaign launched during Recycling Week, gaining national coverage on East Midlands Today. November also saw the return of the popular free trees giveaway and this year the programme was oversubscribed in less than a week.
- Economic Development – Working to promote local organisations and charities that have benefitted from UKSPF funding including Broxtowe Women's Project, Eastwood AF and RideWise. Kimberley Means Business light installations for Halloween and Christmas, along with case studies on Kimberley businesses that have received booster grants.
- Christmas Light Switch On events – promoting events across the Borough in Beeston, Eastwood, Stapleford and Kimberley. Including the promotion of the sensory Santa sessions which were fully booked.
- Bramcote Crematorium pre-payment – working with the team at Bramcote Crematorium on the new pre-payment cremation deed encouraging residents

across Broxtowe and Erewash to take advantage of this opportunity to help with the cost of dying. Charities report that the cost of dying has significantly increased in recent years. The new prepaid cremation deed allows anyone 60 or over to benefit from fixing the cost of cremation at today's prices.

Civic Office

The Civic Team delivered a successful Remembrance Parade on Sunday 10 November working with the army at Chetwynd Barracks. The parade had a higher attendance this year with around 800 residents, the event saw more youth uniformed organisations join the parade and over 100 joined the church service.

The Mayor raised the White Ribbon Flag on Monday 25 November to mark the start of 16 days of action with this year's theme: 'It starts with men'.

The Mayor has a very busy festive season spending time with our employees at the Beeston Offices, Kimberley Depot, the D.H. Lawrence Museum and Bramcote Crematorium to thank them for their hard work throughout the year. Along with tea and cake with our Freeman and Alderman.

The Mayor will also host her first thank you afternoon tea in Eastwood on 18 December, with those that have contributed to our local communities in Eastwood and surrounding areas.

Preparations are also underway as the Mayor will host a volunteer dinner next year with nominations opening up in January.

The team are also making preparations for Holocaust Memorial Day with the annual event at Bramcote Hills where all Members are invited to attend.

Human Resources

National Pay Award Negotiations

The 2023/24 Local Government Pay Award was agreed on 22 October 2024. The offer was agreed as a £1,290 flat increase across all pay points below Heads of Service and will be implemented (with back pay) in December 2024 pay.

Learning and Development

The Council's rolling Institute of Leadership and Management course has commenced and is about half way through. We have 14 employees across departments who are undertaking certificates in Level 3 and Level 5 in Leadership and Management. From the previous Level 5 cohort, thirteen have already passed, with three still working in the process of completing.

The HR Team continues to deliver its 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.

Further Trauma training is being booked for the new year, with an in-depth, bespoke session 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 along with weekly inductions.

Work Experience

Throughout October, the Council welcomed two Work Experience students – one at D.H. Lawrence Museum and one who will be assisting the Events Team with Christmas Lights switch-ons.

Apprenticeships

The Council won another award for its Apprenticeships Programme at the East Midlands Regional Ceremony in October 2024 – 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.

The Council's Human Resources and Apprenticeships Officer is Chair of the East Midlands Area Apprenticeship Network, and is continuing to promote the Council's interests and profile both regionally and nationally.

The Council currently has sixteen apprenticeship courses being undertaken, with a further five in the pipeline including two Level 7 Apprenticeships for Heads of Service.

Other News

The Human Resources Team provided flu jabs for employees in the Council Offices and Kimberley Depot. These were free of charge and around 100 employees took advantage of the offer to support them in the Winter months.

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.