

Report to the Council

Subject: Finance and Technology Portfolio

Date : 19 February 2013

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Syd Stavrou

Recommending:

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

Accountancy

This is always a very busy time of year for the Accountancy Service with the work to compile the budget and produce a variety of reports to the many meetings that consider the budget. As there is a separate report on the budget I will not say anything more about it here.

Benefits

Shortly after our last meeting on 18 December, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced that the implementation of the weekly benefit cap was being delayed. Instead of the cap being applied in all areas from 1 April 2013 it is now only being applied in four London Boroughs as pilots. The date when the cap will be effective for our residents is unclear as all the DWP have said so far is that the cap will be rolled out to other areas from the summer. This was rather frustrating news as a lot of time and effort had gone into identifying the residents who we thought would be affected and informing them about the change.

There have been no further announcements yet about when we will be required to start migrating Housing Benefit claims to Universal Credit or indeed what DWP wants the role of local authorities to be in administering Universal Credit. I will of course keep Members informed as any further information becomes available.

Revenues

Despite the difficult economic environment collection rates for both Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates continue to be good. At the end of December the in-year collection rate for Council Tax was 77.87% which was slightly behind the target of 78.02%. In contrast Non-Domestic Rates was slightly ahead of the target of 81.27% with 81.33% having been collected.

Current collection rates are very similar to the position at this time last year, so as long as there is no significant downturn in the local economy in the last quarter of the year, the full year collection targets could still be achieved.

Performance Management

Key Performance Indicators

A range of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for 2012/13 was adopted by the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee in March 2012, and a

target was set for at least 70% of the indicators to achieve target performance by the end of the year.

For the first half year (1 April to 30 September 2012), 59.26% of the quarterly monitored KPIs achieved target performance. Cumulative performance reports for each KPI were considered by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel at its meeting in November 2012. KPI performance for the third quarter of the year has recently been reviewed by Management Board, and detailed performance reports will be considered by the Scrutiny Panel next month.

Performance targets for the KPIs for 2013/14 are currently being developed, and will be considered by the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee at its next meeting.

Key Objectives

Mid-year progress against the Council's key objectives for 2012/13, was reported to the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November/December 2012. The key objectives reflect national and local priorities, specific service challenges, and provide a statement of the authority's plans for the year. Outturn performance against the objectives will be reported to Members in June 2013.

Draft key objectives for 2013/14 are currently being developed. In accordance with usual practice, the proposed objectives will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting, prior to adoption by the Cabinet on 11 March 2013. Once agreed, the key objectives will be published on the Council's website as a supplement to the current Corporate Plan, and mid-year progress will be reported in late 2013.

Technology

Presentation on Internet Connectivity

On 22 January the Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a presentation on internet connectivity from Ms Annette Thorpe (Regional Partnership Director for the East of England with British Telecom). This was an extremely interesting presentation which generated a good debate and a number of questions. For those Members who were unable to attend it is worth repeating some of the information Ms Thorpe conveyed.

Within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport there is a unit known as Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) which is responsible for managing the Government's broadband funding. BDUK has provided Essex County Council (ECC) with £6.4 million and ECC have match funded this amount to upgrade internet services to areas that would not meet commercial criteria. ECC are expected to issue a tender for improved internet services at the end of April. As part of the process ECC will be seeking to identify areas of high demand that fall outside the operator's commercial plans. These areas will be known as "Intervention Areas" and will be the areas that funding is targeted at. Therefore it is important that residents and businesses register their need for improved internet services at www.essex.gov.uk/ruralbroadband.

Currently only 9 of the 22 telephone exchanges that serve this district are enabled for super-fast internet services so I do urge everyone to register so that this situation can be improved.

Telephone switch replacement project

The Invitation to Quote (ITQ) was published on 11 January by the Essex Procurement Hub on behalf of the Council. The Government Procurement Service (GPS) framework was used, which delivers savings to the UK public sector by aggregating spending power and avoiding the need for separate procurement exercises compliant with the European regulations. The closing date for expressions of interest is the 13 February and the successful supplier should be selected towards the end of March. Implementation will then start at the beginning of the new financial year.