

Note for Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee – November 2016

The Portfolio Holder for Finance has responsibility for the following areas:

Counter Fraud and Corporate Enforcement

In this financial year internal; audit has completed around 10 audits. All have been satisfactory with no significant areas of weakness. Recommendations have been made to improve processes

Investigations have been working on putting in to place a corporate enforcement team to coordinate all types enforcement across the Council's services. In the last year the team has prosecuted 12 cases involving waste (fly tipping / household duty of car / no waste documentation) and 1 Council tax reduction fraud. We have issued 17 fixed penalty notices for a wide range of offences, ranging from dog fouling to fly tipping. CCTV cameras at notorious fly tipping hot spots which has resulted in approximately 70% reduction in tipping. The team has also dealt with five illegal traveller incursions across the Borough, issuing legal paperwork in a timely manner to ensure the travellers moved on with minimum disruption to residents. In addition the team has:

- Led the successful 'Clean for the Queen' campaign for the Borough.
- Participated in the 'Don't stop his family having a home' tenancy fraud campaign with Accent Group.
- Carried out the Cabinet Office National Fraud Initiative single person discount / electoral role exercise that has yielded £15,000 in savings (ongoing).
- Run "We're watching you" anti dog fouling campaign alongside Keep Britain Tidy

Finance

The Finance department published the accounts in time for the 30th June deadline and the audit was completed by the 30th September deadline. In addition the Council received a clean audit report and only a few recommendations – this was a complete change from the previous year. The service has continued to work on developing reporting using civica and is currently working on integrating the payroll and financial systems to take out a lot of the manual manipulation of data that is required at present.

Staff have worked hard to maximise treasury returns this year and the Council is now in the top quartile for treasury performance. In addition working closely with our advisors Arling Close a lot of work has been put in to getting the lowest borrowing costs on the Council's recent property acquisitions.

The finance department is going through a restructure at the moment which should equip it for the challenges ahead. The department will need to expand to not only take account of the accounting for the council's property purchases but also in respect of being the lead authority for joint waste. This will involve group accounts amongst other things for the first time.

The Council is overall on budget however the second half of the year will be challenging mainly due to issues around income. Next year's budget is being put together but it is being prepared against a back drop of the loss of the remaining £357k of Government grant hence the drive to raise more income through property.

Looking forward details are still awaited as to how the localisation of business rates will work the future of the new homes bonus and of course the autumn statement all of which will impact on the Council's finances in one way or another.

Legal Services

The team is involved in the major transactions such as the town centre acquisitions and the procurement of a developer for Ashwood House, as well as completing a number of leases for community centres/sports clubs across the borough. There have been a number of prosecutions for various offences, including fly tipping, supporting our colleagues in corporate enforcement. We have a court of Appeal case listed for December on an employment matter. We are also heavily involved in a number of licensing hearings and public inquiries such as the Hook Meadow case.

Other forthcoming projects include procurement advice for the Arena project and the new grounds maintenance contract. Other contracts range from new IT provision to pantomimes!

The team is also carrying some work for other councils, including a CPO of a listed building, which is bringing in a small amount of extra income, in addition to our normal fees charged for s106 agreements and undertakings.

Finally the legal service has taken on the Council's first legal apprentice. Luke Jones will be studying towards his legal executive qualifications in due course following day release to Kingston College.

Procurement

The Council has a clear set of procurement regulations and guidance. Our procurement advice function was until recently provided via a collaboration with Woking Borough Council. This agreement has come to an end and alternative options are being considered such as in-house provision.

The year has been dominated by the Joint Waste Contract award however a number of smaller contracts have been tendered and awarded such as the catering concession at Lightwater Country Park. Current re-tendering preparation is underway for the grounds maintenance contract and the future of the Arena Leisure Centre.

The impact of BREXIT on European public procurement regulations will be followed closely.

Revenues and Benefits

Council Tax and Business Rates provide the majority of the Councils funding. Business Rates collection rate was 99.7% last year, 3rd in UK, and Council Tax was in top quartile.

Department has worked hard on collecting arrears by taking more court action and using legal tools available to it such as winding up orders, seizing of goods and attachment to earnings. This shows that the Council is serious about collecting the money it is owed but has also lead to an increased number of complaints. Two recent success of this policy. Firstly the recovery of £107k dating back to 2010 from a Bahamas based company which was threatened with winding up. Secondly working with GIS a "missing" house was identified and £20,000 in back council tax recovered

Speed of benefits processing is now above national average and the service is working with residents affected by the benefits cap. The team has also received a number of compliments for good service which were particularly welcome.