

Report from the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources

COUNCIL BUDGET

Just a couple of weeks ago, a Full Council meeting saw a legal budget set for the coming year by 43 votes to 21.

This is a budget which has once again had to battle austerity and a Government which has reduced funding to our council which includes some of the most deprived areas in the country.

Despite the difficulties this council has again managed to set a budget that will see no major cuts to children's care, adult social care or other vital services.

Spend freeze, vacancy freeze and agency freeze are all still in operation to manage the 2019/20 financial position in line with budget allocation. Monitoring updates are provided at the Audit and Risk Management Committee.

PREPARATION FOR FINANCIAL YEAR-END

As year-end closedown planning continues, we are testing new software that is set to improve the processes. Completion is expected by 28 February and is set to bring faster and easier accounts closedown, whilst ensuring the Council remains code-compliant

PUBLIC SECTOR SOCIAL IMPACT FUND (PSSIF) INVESTMENT

The council has joined with other Local Authorities to become a founder member and investor in the Public Sector Social Impact Fund.

Social Enterprise UK defines social impact as: "The effect of an activity on the social fabric of the community and wellbeing of the individuals and families."

All social impact projects/investments will aim to improve the lives of UK residents and will cover a variety of industry sectors including:

- Automotive – e.g. electric car charging point
- Education – e.g. special needs schools
- Energy – e.g. solar/wind
- Environmental – e.g. forestry
- Finance – local lending vehicles
- Industrial – e.g. energy savings and efficiency equipment
- Property – e.g. social housing

The Fund utilises the fact that the council has replenishing positive cash flows which can be invested in services ahead of use. This will allow investment in activities which meet the council's social and environmental objectives, while aiming for higher returns than shorter term investments typically achieve. £10 million has been invested in the fund.

COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

Community Wealth Building reorganises local economies to be fairer and stops wealth flowing out of our communities, towns and cities. It places control of this wealth into the hands of local people, communities, businesses and organisations.

The Community Wealth Building Strategy was passed at Cabinet on 24 February, and officially launched the same day.

Strategy outcomes are based around the five pillars of community wealth building:

1. Residents of Wirral have ownership of the economy and have a say in what happens to wealth generated by their communities.
2. Procurement practices of Wirral anchor institutions are used to help build the wealth of our local communities.
3. Council land and assets are used as a base to build community wealth.
4. Wealth that exists in Wirral is harnessed to increase investment in local communities.
5. Wirral residents are in secure and quality employment with progression opportunities and good terms and conditions.

Following the launch, action plans will be produced in order to deliver each outcome of the strategy.

Wirral continues to work with The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), which has supported discussions with other anchor institutions in Wirral (such as the NHS and CCG) to create a Wirral Anchor Procurement Group. This group will help to deliver one of the key outcomes of the strategy.

LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

A Council Tax Support Scheme to financially assist our most vulnerable residents will be implemented in April 2020.

As part of the government's welfare reform programme, Council Tax Benefit was abolished in 2013 and replaced by a local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Nationally, funding for the new scheme was reduced by 10% in comparison to the Council Tax Benefit Scheme.

The reduction in funding meant that many councils offset the shortfall by reducing the amount of support granted to householders. In addition, central Government prescribed that non-working age claimants (i.e. pensioners) were automatically protected from the abolition of Council Tax Benefit. This meant that the cut in funding was even greater than the 10% for non-protected groups.

Following consultation, Wirral Council decided – in addition to the protection offered to pensioners – it would also protect other groups of householders in receipt of certain disability benefits.

Approximately 32,000 households benefit from the scheme. Any change to this support has the potential to be far reaching on some of the poorest households in the borough

For working age claimants in non-protected groups, Council Tax Reduction was reduced by central Government, so they had to pay a minimum of 22% towards their Council Tax bill each year. The amount they could be liable for could be greater than 22%, based on income.

In order to assist these households, it is proposed to reduce the minimum amount payable at the start of the calculation from 22% to 12%. This would help households most in need of financial assistance, and if adopted would see reductions to Council Tax bills for some of the poorest and most vulnerable households in the borough – offering them greater help and support.

ONLINE SERVICES

The launch of the My Wirral Account in 2018, and further take up of the Revenues and Benefits Portal is paving the way in a shift to online services. Currently there are 25,887 MyWirral accounts and 62,665 residents signed up the Revenues & Benefits portal.

NEW ONLINE DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT FORM

As of February, residents can now apply for Discretionary Housing Payments via the council website.

At times of financial stresses, having the ability to apply from a laptop, computer or mobile device can make the process smoother and more convenient.

MEMBER PORTAL

A new Member Portal has been developed and will go live in 2020 – giving members real-time access to cases and added ability to track progress by service areas.

NEW BLUE BADGE ONLINE APPLICATION

Supported by the Programme Office, Customer Services have worked to design, develop, test and launch a new Blue Badge online application.

The process reduces the application size and includes the roll out of a new 'hidden disability' criteria.

ROLL-OUT OF DBS IN SCHOOLS

Finance has supported HR/OD in the development and roll-out of an electronic DBS to schools - seeing a huge reduction in waiting times, much to the delight of our schools.

OSS AND CONTACT CENTRE

OSS continues to maintain service delivery.

From March 2020, the Call Centre will be generating income by completing learner surveys on behalf of the Lifelong Learning Service. This is while also maintaining performance indicators: the team is under the target of two minutes for call waiting, and call handling time is below the target of 4 minutes 30.

INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN – 2019/2020

This is on-course to deliver by year-end and includes the delivery of targeted assurance work across all key risks to the organisation.

INCOME GENERATION – ACADEMY SCHOOLS

Four Academy Schools are now contracted to receive Internal Audit Services, with talks ongoing with a number of other schools across the borough. External, income generating work now includes schools, Wirral Growth Company, Evolutions and Merseyside Pension Fund.

WIRRAL HEALTH AND CARE COMMISSIONING

Wirral Internal Audit Services - in conjunction with NHS auditors – developed collaborative working arrangements to support several joint audits; evaluating key risks and providing assurances for stakeholders.

This resulted in two separate reports for senior management evaluating governance, finance and performance, risk and contract management, and operational arrangements. The most recent report was published in January 2020.

We are the only council across the North West to have developed this approach, and we are currently sharing it as good practice with other local authorities.