

## CABINET MEMBERS REPORT TO COUNCIL

17 November 2021

### **COUNCILLOR E SEWARD - CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, ASSETS, LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

For the period September to November 2021

#### **1 Progress on Portfolio Matters.**

##### **Finance**

**Zero Based Budgeting (ZBB)** – Operational managers have now completed their Zero Based Budgeting returns. The Finance team have undertaken a quality assurance process, prior to their review by Cabinet. The Council's budget will now be prepared based on provisional allocations of Gold and Silver level budgets for each service area which were made by Cabinet earlier this month.

**Provisional Local Finance Settlement** – this was announced on Wednesday 27 October and was supported by a very helpful update to all Members by Lucy Hume from the finance team. The finance team are working on projections and likely scenarios to feed in to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and budget process for 2022/23. There was no sign of either the Fair Funding Review, or the review of the Business Rates Retention System and it now seems unlikely that either of these reviews will come forward before 2024/25 although officers will keep this under review and update if any further information is received. The final settlement announcement is expected in February 2022.

**2019-20 Statement of Accounts** – The audit of the draft statement of accounts is due to begin on 6<sup>th</sup> December. It is hoped that the final version will be ready to sign off at the March meeting of Governance, Risk and Audit Committee (GRAC). The audit has experienced delays due to resourcing issues being experienced by auditors nationally, as well as shifting accounts preparation deadlines caused by COVID 19 and the Redmond Review recommendations.

##### **Property Services**

**Decarbonisation** – data provided for baseline audit to enable an improvement plan to be developed for Council assets to help reduce carbon emissions.

**Disposal of assets** – Offers have been received and are being assessed for Parklands. Report to be prepared for Cabinet to consider.

**Acquisitions** – offers agreed on 2 further properties for use as temporary accommodation.

**Vacant property** – Proposals received for the Art Deco Block, Cromer and North Lodge Park which are currently being assessed. The Melbourne Slope lease proposal is also progressing. There is a room at Fakenham Connect, 2 units at

Cornish Ways and Hornbeam Road North Walsham currently being marketed.

**Marrams, Cromer** – assessing viability of current repairs against potential redevelopment and improvement of the site.

### **Legal Services**

**Trainees** - Three trainee solicitors have been appointed. One was a legal assistant within the team and has a lot of experience. Another has worked for other local authorities in a legal capacity and had previously worked on a short temporary contract with eastlaw. The third has worked in a local authority and a well-respected High Street firm of solicitors.

**New appointment** - a Legal, Finance and Democratic Services Assistant has joined the Council, providing assistance to the teams and linking departments within the directorate.

**Eastlaw** - continue to provide legal services to the Council and also externally (other local authorities and public sector organisations) bringing in additional income.

**Lease of the Reef** – work is ongoing to finalise the lease of the new facility in Sheringham to Everyone Active. Lease with Tenant solicitors for comments.

**Lease of Sheringham Little Theatre** – lease out with Tenant for comments.

**Lease Blue Sky Café, Runton Road, Cromer** – new rental calculated which includes alterations to property. Draft lease provided to client.

**Public Open Space transfer** - West Side Market Lane, Wells, Hopkins Homes site. Transfer in progress.

**Section 106** - agreement for Trinity College land at Fakenham completed to allow major residential and associated development to proceed.

**Urgent Works Notice** - served in relation to premises at Norwich Street, Fakenham.

### **Revenues**

**Grants award** – following the Council's successful Public Finance Award last month we have also now been highly commended by the Institute of Revenues Rating & Valuation (IRRV) for our work relating to the payment of business grants as part of our Covid support work. We continue to do reconciliation returns to government for each grant scheme and monthly grant returns for the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) Scheme.

**Council Tax collection** – as at 31 October 2021 our collection rate is 64.23% against a target of 63.80%, this equates to excess collection over the target of £352k.

**Non-Domestic (Business) Rates (NDR) collection** - as at 31 October 2021 our collection rate is 65.42% against target of 67.50%, a shortfall in collection of £420k. This deficit is due to the NDR debit raise caused by post Budget changes and not a reduction in performance.

The relief awarded will be compensated through a Section 31 Grant, however the reason for a drop in collection is because the 100% relief was reduced from 1 July 2021 to 66% so this is a reduction in relief which we need to collect. The re-billing exercise that the Revenues team undertook in June took account of this so 1,800 or so businesses have had this debit spread over their remaining instalments and hence why the performance is shown as down generally.

**QRC2 Government Return** – this is the quarterly return to central government to report on how much council tax and non-domestic rates are collected during quarter 2 2021-22 and was submitted on time.

**CTB1 Government Return** – this is the annual return on the council tax base which again was submitted on time to central government. This showed an increase in Band D equivalent property numbers of 359.4 since last year and a reduction of 84.6 Band D equivalent long-term empty properties which is extremely encouraging and a positive direction of travel for the Council.

### **Democratic Services**

**Staffing** - A long-standing member of the team has recently left and we are currently going through the recruitment process to replace them.

**Committees** - The Council's formal committees have returned to meeting in person in the Council Chamber. So far this has worked quite well, although we do anticipate potential challenges as we head into the winter months and Members and officers may be required to isolate. Smaller committees may struggle to achieve quorum if Covid cases continue to rise.

**Governance improvements** - A new Cabinet Working Party for projects has been established and the first meeting was held on 20<sup>th</sup> October. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is also in the process of establishing a panel to scrutinise projects.

## **2 Forthcoming Activities and Developments.**

### **Finance**

**Upcoming Reports** – a number of reports are due to be considered over the following months as follows;

- Budget Monitoring Report Period 10
- Capital Strategy
- Treasury Management Strategy
- Investment Strategy
- 2021/22 Budget/Council Tax setting to include;
  - Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022/2023 onwards;
  - 2022/23 fees & charges; and
  - 2022/23 capital programme

### **Legal**

- Enforcement appeal relating to Arkady, Holt Road, Cley pending consideration of planning applications.

- Varying section 106 agreements to transfer affordable housing tenure to affordable rented housing on different sites.

### **Revenues**

- Following the successful presentation to cabinet members for two level 3 Business Administration Apprentices, we have now advertised for the two positions. The details with a video on the merits of becoming an apprentice is on our website.
- Working on improvements to automate part of the processing of council tax schedules.
- Creating a list of online forms for IT to create that would improve speed of application for customers and efficiencies within revenues.
- Starting to prepare for year-end/annual billing and the latest announcements to reliefs by the chancellor.
- Starting to prepare for the NNDR1 government return.

### **3 Meetings attended**

Nothing further to report.