



Report of:	To:	Date
Councillor Michael Vincent, Resources Portfolio Holder	Council	27 January 2022

Executive Report: Resources Portfolio Holder

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To inform Council of progress on key objectives and the current position on issues within the Resources Portfolio, as set out below.

2. Finance

- 2.1 As a result of the pandemic, notification from Central Government of the 2022/23 financial settlement did not arrive by their 6 December target deadline and no technical consultation was published in advance. This means that the timescales are extremely tight again for producing the council's annual budget. It is highly likely that the budget for 2022/23 will be based on provisional data. The Chancellor's Autumn Budget indicated that Shire Districts would be allowed to raise council tax by 1.99% or £5, whichever is highest, without triggering a referendum and this has been factored into the Medium Term Financial Plan in line with the report to Cabinet in October 2021.
- 2.2 It is still the intention that an updated forecast showing our projected spending levels and the recommended council tax for 2022/23 will be presented at the Cabinet meeting on 16 February. Inevitably, some information will be based on forecast assumptions but if for instance, details are confirmed around the pay award for 2021/22 and future years these will replace the estimates.
- 2.3 Two new Covid-19 business grants were announced before Christmas in response to the rise in the Omicron variant. An application process is in place and we are promoting both schemes on our website and via other media channels. We have paid out nearly £52 million in business grants already during the pandemic helping to keep over 3,000 businesses trading in Wyre and this work will continue to the end of March 2022.

3. Governance

- 3.1** Congratulations to Marianne Unwin in Democratic Services who fought off competition from other shortlisted candidates at Spelthorne and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Councils to be awarded the Association of Democratic Services Officers 'Rookie of the Year' award for 2021. This is well deserved recognition and reflects not only Marianne's efforts but also the commitment and dedication of the team during a challenging period. Wyre was the only council from the north west represented on the shortlists and we were proud to carry the torch for the region.

4. Contact Centre

- 4.1** The migration of the housing benefit (HB) caseload to Universal Credit (UC) has been underway in Wyre since July 2018. At the time the migration commenced there were approximately 4,000 working-age HB claims in payment, plus almost 3,000 pension-age claims. The number of working-age claims has recently dropped to under 2,000, with the remaining claims due to be migrated to UC at some point between now and 2025 according to DWP plans. While the reduction in active HB claims should have had the impact of reducing the benefits workload, the team now receive in excess of 2,500 additional notifications from the DWP each month advising of changes to claimants UC awards. Each of these notifications needs processing to ensure that the change it advises of has no impact on the claimants Localised Council Tax Support claim. This has had the impact of substantially increasing the workload of the benefits team. In addition, as things stand currently, working-age UC claimants reaching pension-age are required to start claiming help with their housing costs through the HB scheme again, instead of via UC.
- 4.2** For a number of years up until February 2019, the Contact Centre provided a Benefits Mobile Advice Centre (BMAC) to make the HB Service more accessible to residents. The BMAC covered all areas of the borough, but was deployed in Fleetwood for a large proportion of its operating time. Since the introduction of UC however, the need for the service has massively diminished. Most of the HB claimants who used to visit the BMAC have been migrated to UC and no longer need the service. In addition, the Citizens Advice Service also provide a Digital Hub at Fleetwood Market with our support, where residents can go for assistance with their benefits. After consideration, and as it hasn't been used for over two years, the BMAC has been decommissioned, with the associated savings on running costs and its replacement being used to fund other service improvements.
- 4.3** Lancashire County Council have allocated £270,000 to Wyre in Household Support Grant in order to provide additional financial assistance to those Wyre residents who are on low incomes and struggling with rising household costs. To ensure that those most in need get financial support as quickly as possible, the council has entered into a partnership arrangement with the West Lancashire Citizens Advice Service to award electricity and gas vouchers to eligible applicants. The vouchers can only be used by the applicant and on a

temporary basis will allow them to use the money they would have spent on electricity and gas on other things. As there are in excess of 9,300 households in Wyre in receipt of Localised Council Tax Support and other low income benefits, it is likely that there will be a high number of applications for the vouchers and advice on how to claim is on our website.

5. Comments and questions

- 5.1** In accordance with procedure rule 10.3 any member of Council will be able to ask me a question or make a comment on the contents of my report or on any issue, which falls within my area of responsibility. I will respond to any such questions or comments in accordance with Procedure Rule 10.5.