



Report of:	To:	Date
Councillor David Henderson, Resources Portfolio Holder	Council	26 January 2023

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 delayed Autumn Statement, notification from Central Government of the 2023/24 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 2023/24 will be based on provisional data. The Chancellor's Autumn Budget indicated that Shire Districts would be allowed to raise council tax by 2.99% (£6.42) or £5 on a Band D property, whichever is highest, without triggering a referendum.
- 2.2** It is still the intention that an updated forecast showing our projected spending levels and the recommended council tax for 2023/24 will be presented at the Cabinet meeting on 15 February. Inevitably, some information will be based on forecast assumptions but if for instance, details are confirmed around the pay award for 2023/24 and future years these will replace the estimates.

3. Governance and Business Support

- 3.1** The Chief Executives pay award of £1,925 has now been agreed in line with staff and chief officers pay increase. The aim for the 2023/24 pay award is for discussions between the national employers and unions to commence earlier, in the hope of reaching an agreement closer to 1 April than in previous years.
- 3.2** Aspiring leaders training was launched on 17 January to our new and upcoming managers. The programme consists of four modules; leading through change, resilience for managers, coaching skills and engaging leadership. To date 24 officers have been selected to take part in the training, which will run for three months ending on 23 March 2023.

3.3 The passing of the Elections Bill brings about considerable changes for those delivering, participating and campaigning in elections in the UK. With the May 2023 elections fast approaching, the focus of the council has now turned to implementation, and ensuring that the council has time to understand and prepare for the new measures. A new burdens grant totalling £54,950 (£19,628 in 2022/23 and £35,322 in 2023/24) has been allocated to Wyre to meet the main costs of implementing the Act. As Wyre has scheduled polls in May 2023, the grant also includes additional funding for local elector engagement. The grant is a specific revenue grant for the 2022/23 to 2023/2024 financial years only and is not ring-fenced.

4. Contact Centre

4.1 A six week consultation regarding proposed changes to the Localised Council Tax Support (LCTS) scheme has now closed. Though the number of responses to the consultation was low (67 responders), 61.2% (41) of those who responded supported the key proposal to remove the requirement for Wyre council tax payers claiming LCTS to pay at least 8.5% of the council tax charge themselves. If this proposed change is subsequently agreed, it will mean that those on the lowest incomes will not have to contribute to their council tax payments, thus easing the ever increasing financial pressure on them emanating from the cost of living crisis. This proposal and another to adopt the same methodology as used by the DWP to calculate the LCTS entitlement of self-employed LCTS claimants are to be considered in a separate item on the agenda.

4.2 The Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme closed on 30 November 2022. In total 40,268 payments of £150 were made under the scheme to council tax payers with homes in council tax bands A to D. At the point the scheme closed and despite numerous requests to do so, 2,444 council tax payers had still not contacted the council to claim their payment. In order to ensure that this money wasn't 'lost', £150 was credited to these payer's council tax accounts. Compliance Officers are now in the process of contacting these residents in order to ensure that those who have failed to make contact are entitled to receive the £150 payment.

4.3 The Discretionary Energy Rebate scheme also closed on 30 November 2022. The council received £266,100 from the Government to fund this scheme. Initially £28,350 of this funding was used to award 189 LCTS claimants with homes in council tax bands E to H a payment of £150. A further £180,000 was used to help fund payments of £90 to pension-age LCTS claimants and £50 to working-age LCTS claimants (Household Support Funding was also used to top-up these payments). At the point the scheme closed, after allowing for ad-hoc applications for assistance made via an online application on the council website, the remaining £48,600 balance of the funding was used to make 324 payments of £150 to residents who receive an exemption from paying council tax due to severe mental impairment, student status or being aged under 18.

- 4.4** The council has also received £430k from a third tranche of Household Support (HSF) funding. This funding is being allocated between now and 31 March 2023 in line with the Government's guidance:
- £40,000 is to be paid to local Food Banks. The first payments of £10,000 to The Pantry in Fleetwood and £7,000 to HelpPKE in Preesall and Knott End have already been made. It is intended that further payments will be made in the new year.
 - £25,000 has been set aside for the "warm spaces" initiative.
 - £25,000 has been set aside to support Domestic Violence Support.
 - A payment of £200 has been made (in the form of a supermarket voucher – the cheapest and easiest way to distribute funding) to 396 Wyre residents whose council tax band has been reduced by one as a result of having had to have disabled adaptations made to their home.
 - A payment of up to £200 is to be made to 253 residents who receive a 25% council tax discount as their partner or other household members over the age of 18 are disregarded for council tax purposes owing to severe mental impairment, leaving them as the only adult counted as occupying their home.
 - A payment of up to £200 is to be made to 118 residents who receive a 25% council tax discount as their partner or other household members over the age of 18 are disregarded for council tax purposes owing to their full-time student status, leaving them as the only adult counted as occupying their home.
 - Compliance officers are to visit Houses in Multiple Occupation (including Supported Accommodation) in the borough to complete applications for a payment of up to £200 for residents who have to pay or contribute to their own gas and electricity bills, but did not receive either a £150 payment from the Energy Rebate Fund, or a payment from previous rounds of HSF funding.
- 4.5** An online application is to be placed on the council website inviting applications from households who do not claim social benefits, but whose incomes are such that they are struggling with the cost of living crisis. With the exception of the £150 Energy rebate payments in respect of homes in council tax bands A to D, these households haven't received any other cost of living payments from either the council, or the DWP.
- 4.6** The Government recently announced the introduction of two schemes: The Energy Bill Support Scheme Alternative Funding (EBSSAF) and the Alternative Energy Support Scheme (AESS) aimed at providing financial support to those who don't pay their bills directly to gas or electricity companies, or don't use traditional mains gas or electricity to power their homes. They also announced that both schemes would be administered

in part by councils. To date the council has received very limited information as to what will be required with regard to these schemes. However, we have been informed that applications for payments under the EBSSAF will be made via the GOV.uk website and that only successful applications will be passed to the council for confirmation of residency and payment. From the information provided to date it is likely that problems will arise with regard to people residing in holiday homes on holiday caravan sites as they are living on the sites illegally and are not registered for council tax, and also some residents of care homes as we have no records relating to the occupants of these establishments. Guidance is expected before Christmas which it is hoped will provide some clarification.

5. Comments and questions

- 5.1** In accordance with procedure rule 11.3 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 11.5.