

MINUTES

FINANCE AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

7 JUNE 2022

Present:

Cllr Adeleke	Cllr Guest
Cllr Chapman	Cllr Sobaan Mahmood
Cllr Cloughton (Vice-Chairman)	Cllr Peter
Cllr Douris (Chairman)	Cllr Symington
Cllr Freedman	Cllr Tindall

Officers:

Nigel Howcutt (Chief Finance Officer)
Mark Brookes (Assistant Director, Legal and Democratic Services)
Ben Trueman (Head of Digital)
Farida Hussain (Head of Legal and Democratic Services)
Ben Hosier (Head of Commercial Development)
Kelvin Soley (Head of Communications)
Chris Baker (Head of Revenues, Benefits and Fraud)
Hannah Peacock (Head of Transformation)
Trudi Angel (Corporate and Democratic Support Officer)

Also in attendance:

Cllr Andrew Williams (Portfolio Holder, Corporate and Contracted Services)
Cllr Graeme Elliot (Portfolio Holder, Finance and Resources)

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were unavailable due to a technical error and therefore would be agreed at the next meeting.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor's Sinha, Suqlain Mahmood and Townsend.

Councillor Peter substituted for Councillor Suqlain Mahmood.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

5 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN

None.

6 ACTION POINTS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Any outstanding action points from the previous meeting will be carried over and discussed at the next meeting.

7 ENERGY BILLS REBATE

C Baker presented an overview of the rebate as part of the government's support for households, and that Dacorum will be making approximately 43k payments of £150 to residents. The majority of payments will be made via direct debit details held for council tax, and around 28k payments have been made automatically following additional cross checks. In instances where automatic payments could not be made, letters have been sent to direct people to the website, or they can call to be guided through the process over the phone. Further anti-fraud checks then need to be made before making payments, and if these checks can't be completed then the amount will instead be applied to the person's council tax account.

C Baker advised that around £6.75m of payments would be made overall, of which £5.1m has been paid out today, and around 4k council tax credits are expected to be applied by the end of the week. Around 5k people are yet to respond to their letter, and if no response is received within the next 3 weeks, then a credit will be applied to their council tax account.

Cllr Tindall commented on the vulnerable section of society and asked if the 5k yet to respond are council tenants. C Baker advised housing officers and tenant support are already assisting tenants with this and anyone receiving the rebate as a credit on their council tax bill will receive a new bill detailing this.

Cllr Tindall noted examples in the private rental sector where a portion of council tax is added to rents and therefore the landlord is taking the rebate. C Baker responded that it was a possibility this had happened and that some controls in place require a link between the bank account and the person liable for council tax help mitigate against this.

Cllr Tindall asked that the team working on this be thanked for their work. Cllr Douris echoed this, adding that the council and its officers have gone above and beyond to get funds due to people as quickly as possible.

Cllr Freedman asked why multiple payment dates were set up. C Baker agreed that it would be beneficial to release the payments on one date, though the staggered

payments were to ensure payments could be made as soon as possible to those who were eligible. It was also noted that payments were due to differing direct debit payment dates.

Cllr Symington queried how rebates had been internally costed. C Baker confirmed the focus had been on making payments, though they will look at the cost of resourcing the service. C Baker added that the main cost would likely be officer time and diverting work away from other services.

Cllr Adeleke asked how much pressure staff are experiencing having been taken away from their core functions. Cllr Adeleke then asked about anti-fraud checks and how much time the team has to spend on this. C Baker advised that it had been the toughest individual process he had undertaken and had therefore put the team under more pressure, with more challenges ahead. On the anti-fraud checks, C Baker explained that the government has mandated the process and that he had concerns that the process was preventing some eligible people from receiving the rebate directly.

Cllr Chapman asked when letters were sent out and how long residents have to respond. C Baker clarified that the letters were sent around 5-6 weeks ago. Residents were told to expect payments within 3 weeks and timeline information is available on the website.

Cllr Peter asked why payments were made so early and why they weren't delayed until late autumn. Cllr Douris noted that this was not the decision of the council and timelines were set out by central government.

Cllr Guest asked if funding was coming from the government. It was confirmed that the payments and administrative costs come from government.

Cllr Douris thanked C Baker and the team for their work.

8 QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT - FINANCE AND RESOURCES

N Howcutt presented the report, particularly noting that the 3 red KPIs, (1) general fund capital expenditure, and a provisional outturn report will be on the agenda for the next committee, (2) time taken for debtors to pay, and (3) the time taken to decide a new claim for housing benefit. N Howcutt noted the pressures on the Revenues and Benefits team and that they are improving on the third KPI, and whilst they have fallen slightly short, the bar is particularly high, and they expect to achieve it going forward. N Howcutt next looked at the operational risk register, noting that performance has not changed since Q3, and performance is positive in terms of KPI.

Cllr Douris commented on references to delays regarding RBF06 and the new document management system and asked if anything could've been done differently. C Baker advised that the version of the software was no longer being supported and there are ongoing issues with the new version. C Baker added that there were few opportunities to run tests and therefore issues arose during discovery and the test environment did not accurately reflect the live environment. B Hosier added that they

had no option but to upgrade and that the complexity of the live environment is difficult to replicate for testing.

Cllr Peter commented on the time taken for debtors to pay, noting that the report states improvements have been made and asked what other measures have been put in place. N Howcutt confirmed that there is a debt recovery team who use several items, including regular payments over a longer period of time, and there is a rolling dialogue in place in debtors. N Howcutt stated that these income streams are part of their budget, and whilst they do write-off some debts, this will be done when they have no means of paying and there is no other means of collection. Bad debt has not increased though there is an increase of those on regular payment plans. There are concerns for 2022/23 as much of the debt is the commercial property portfolio.

Cllr Freedman noted the time taken for debtors to pay and asked what type of debtor this includes, suggesting that they separate out the various types of debtors. N Howcutt explained that several debtor registers sit behind the report and stated that they could bring a report on debt provision after Q1 2022/23 to provide the Committee more detail on performance.

Cllr Freedman commented on RBF01 and asked if any delays on processing new claims are not causing delays to getting tenants into accommodation. C Baker advised that housing benefit claims are only made once someone is in accommodation and that new claims for housing benefit are made by a limited number of people with most housing costs now coming through Universal Credit.

Cllr Guest asked if the operational risk register was being presented to the Audit Committee. N Howcutt explained that this sits below the strategic risk register, which goes to the Audit Committee along with the Q4 report, and once this has been signed off, it then goes to Cabinet. Operational risk registers come to the OSCs to provide scrutiny. Cllr Guest asked if strategic risks picked up by the Audit Committee come back to the OSC. N Howcutt advised that the Audit Committee provides the scrutiny for strategic risk, though the risk process is currently under review.

Cllr Tindall commented on those on zero hours contracts and the impact on housing benefit and asked if this was still an issue. C Baker explained that this was now more of a Universal Credit issue. Those who can still claim housing benefit are of pension age or are in supported living.

Cllr Tindall referred to FIN04 and FIN05, noting empty houses and voids, and asked if the Committee would receive this report giving the loss in income. N Howcutt explained that this would go to the Housing and Community Committee, and any financial impact would be brought to this Committee.

Cllr Adeleke referred to F05 and the significant improvement in rent arrears, though this was before the current cost of living crisis. Cllr Adeleke asked if the council have any additional support to help people in addition to what the government is offering. C Baker noted that last year's council tax collection was at a lower level, and whilst they were carrying forward arrears from the previous year, they collected more of this than previously. C Baker explained that the team will continue to work sensitively with residents and get processes in place where possible to spread payments out over a longer period of time. N Howcutt added that it is up to local authorities to

manage their collection rates and that there is no additional support available, and if the cost of living crisis continues into 2022/23 then this will likely impact council tax collection rates.

Outcome:

The Committee noted the report.

9 QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT - CORPORATE AND CONTRACTED SERVICES

M Brookes introduced the report and drew member's attention to the legal cases which were in Court during that quarter. He highlighted that back in February we successfully delivered the Berkhamsted West Ward, Berkhamsted Town Council and the Boxmoor Ward by elections. Happy to take questions.

Cllr Tindall noted the bullet points on page 19 regarding opposition regarding Hackney Carriage drivers, and asked how opposition had manifested. It was noted that the King Ace taxi company won the tender to operate from the train station, which was met with opposition from other taxi operators. The tender was run by the Train Operating Company and the council was not involved in the process.

Cllr Guest referred to page 22 of the report, noting that she was contacted by residents after 5th May to ask why they had not received their polling cards and asked how the message could be made to non-Internet users in future. M Brookes noted that polling cards should go through everyone's doors, and an extensive social media campaign is run alongside this. There is limited resource and therefore cards and social media should make most residents aware of elections. Cllr Guest asked if they could communicate with non-Internet users when there are no elections. M Brookes stated that they could pick this up with the team though it would be expensive to send letters to all residents. Cllr Guest suggested that the Dacorum Digest be used.

Cllr Peter stated it was good to see the successful prosecutions during the quarter and asked how many cases on average they take to court and what percentage of costs are recovered. It was noted there was a moratorium on certain cases during the pandemic and they should now see an increase in activity. On costs, sometimes legal costs aren't pursued, though they will work with finance to ensure costs are pursued when the court awards them. Cllr Peter asked who makes the decision to take someone to court. It was confirmed that it is the officers and legal teams who ensure there is sufficient legal evidence to take someone to court. Cllr Douris commented that the fly tipping prosecutions sent out a strong message.

Cllr Symington commented on the increase of TROs, as detailed on pages 27 and 28 of the report, noting that this was a welcome development. Cllr Symington referred to the TRO on Elm Grove, Berkhamsted F Zone, and asked what the F Zone is. Cllr Symington also noted the change to regulation 10 and how PCNs (Penalty Charge Notices) are issued and asked if the policy was having any impact. Councillor Williams responded to the Elm Grove question, noting that he was contacted by a resident who requested a CPZ for Elm Grove, and it was agreed that this would go out for initial consultation with residents, and 'F' is the identifying code. M Brookes

confirmed that he would send a note to the Committee regarding the impact of the change in regulation 10. **Action.**

Cllr Adeleke commented on the digital printing, noting that £36k was spent in the quarter and that there was no indication on whether this was an increase or decrease, and he asked how this compares to other councils. It was noted that some printing costs are recovered, and the change compared to the previous quarter could be provided. It was suggested that they would need to look over past figures from the last 12 months to provide a better comparison. **Action.**

Cllr Tindall noted that the CCG would go out of existence at the end of the month and wondered if they would continue to be tenants under the ICS or if they would move elsewhere. B Hosier commented that the CCG have been in touch with the organisation who provided the internal signs and arranged for signs to be mocked up with the new acronym, so it is assumed they will remain.

Outcome:

The Committee noted the report.

10 **QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT - PERFORMANCE, PEOPLE AND INNOVATION**

Hannah Peacock was introduced as the new Head of Transformation and Kelvin Soley as the Head of Communications.

B Trueman presented the report, noting that sickness has increased, though there is work ongoing to help decrease this. The increases come from stress, anxiety, Covid-19, and surgery. It was noted there is a deep dive of statistical analysis to look at this and more information will be brought to the Committee in future. It was noted that any HR questions would likely be taken away for M Rawdon to answer at a later date.

On digital, B Trueman highlighted the number of incidents resolved in 2 days, noting that this has improved from 49% to 62% and the staff picture is improving with a new lead officer for the service desk. There is a backlog of older incidents and, as these are resolved, they will impact on this KPI.

Cllr Claughton commented on the increase in absence due to stress and anxiety, stating that it was unsurprising given the pandemic. He noted that the council had also undergone significant change recently, and asked if the deep dive analysis would provide the reasons behind the increase. He said he welcomed what the council was doing to support staff and asked what the take up levels were for what is on offer. B Trueman agreed to pass the questions onto M Rawdon, though there has been good take up of what's on offer within his own team. **Action.**

Cllr Douris noted the importance of the paper and politely asked that relevant officers be in attendance. B Trueman advised that absence may be unavoidable when staff are on leave and in these circumstances, they would look to ask a deputy to attend. It was noted that M Rawdon's deputy currently has Covid, and the new strategic director only started that week and would be unable to provide answers.

Cllr Freedman commented that most wellness activities and support listed appeared to be reactive and recommended a KPI that tracks the number of adaptations requested by staff. Cllr Freedman also suggested that they look at the difference in sickness leave between those who have had a change to where they are working versus those who have always had to attend physically. B Trueman advised that the dialogue between managers and officers is open and direct, and the culture is to be open and understanding. It's in managers' interests that officers are able to continue working and therefore adaptations are made where possible whilst also offering a service to residents.

Cllr Guest noted paragraph 5.3 on page 37 of the report regarding the launch of the Hertfordshire energy advice tool and asked how DBC has worked with the county council on this project. H Peacock advised that she would need to come back with more information on the partnership and provide a written response.

Cllr Guest commented on the roll out of EV charge points in council-run car parks is progressing well and asked if this would include shopping centre sites. B Hosier confirmed that there are a number of neighbourhood sites in the list of sites for charge points, and if the land is owned by the council, then EV charge points can be installed, though this relies on the distribution operator regarding getting cost-efficient electricity to these sites. Surveys are currently underway and there is a limit on how much will be invested. On whether EV charging would be rolled out to the verge hardening sites, B Hosier suggested he asked Joe Guiton about this, though the preference is currently to install points in car parks. Cllr Guest asked if the list of sites could be circulated to the Committee. B Hosier confirmed he would do this tomorrow though he could not confirm which sites would be chosen until the network operator has proposed the cost of infrastructure, and it was agreed that the definite list would be circulated when available. **Action.**

Cllr Douris asked if there is uniformity with all charging points. B Hosier stated that he would assume there is a consistent approach.

Cllr Adeleke commented on the impact of mental health issues and asked when the council would publish a clear roadmap on the return to work. Cllr Douris suggested that officers would not be able to respond to this and that the question should be put to the Head of Paid Service. B Hosier noted the New Ways of Working process that the council is currently undertaking and that he felt it unlikely that they would return to working as they did pre-pandemic. Cllr Adeleke commented that other organisations are putting clear roadmaps in place for staff and asked if the council will publish similar to allow staff to know how often they will be in the office. B Hosier advised that they would not set out what they expect of all staff and that they understand they have staff who work in different ways. Cllr Tindall agreed, noting ongoing discussions with staff representatives to ensure everyone is working together.

Cllr Peter referred to paragraph 2 on page 40 of the report regarding the number of days lost in the quarter having decreased and asked if this was correct. It was noted that this should say 'increased' and would be clarified. **Action.**

Cllr Symington commented on EV charging points and asked what of the portfolio holder's Part 2 decision can be shared with members of the public. Cllr Symington stated that she felt the process had been unsatisfactory and asked for as much information as possible to provide to the public given the number of residents who

have enquired about it. Cllr Douris stated it was unfortunate to not have the minutes for the meeting where this was discussed. Cllr Douris suggested that they bring a paper to the meeting on 5th July. B Hosier stated that he could bring a report to the Committee and share that the council would like EV charging points installed in all car parks and shopping centre, but the investment is carried out by third parties and is unviable for the service provider to invest. Cllr Symington noted that the council would be entering into a 15-20-year contract with an operator and stated that councillors require information that can be made publicly available.

Cllr Douris noted a level of commercial confidentiality on EV charging and that negotiations are currently taking place that have not yet concluded. Cllr Douris urged for patience. Cllr Symington asked that the council be asked to see the contract at some point to provide a level of scrutiny. B Hosier clarified that he is happy to share everything he could with the councillors, but he wanted to share the selected sites with a level of confidence and that he didn't believe they would know this by July. B Hosier clarified that the decision has been made by the portfolio holder's decision team to enter into a contract though the exact locations are yet to be agreed. Cllr Symington commented that any information to share with residents would be welcomed. B Hosier agreed, adding that there would be a marketing programme for the roll out once the decision has been made but that they want to avoid promising residents where the sites would be.

Cllr Freedman noted that the EV discussion had gone on for a long time and asked why the decision was a portfolio holder decision. Cllr Douris stated that this could not be answered in the absence of meeting minutes.

Cllr Tindall looked to HRO4A on page 42 of the report regarding the total of days lost through short-term sickness and asked B Trueman to ask M Rawdon if this measure is usable as some people can continue working from home with short-term sickness. Cllr Douris suggested that M Rawdon provide a written comment on this. **Action**.

Cllr Cloughton referred to page 37 regarding Berkhamsted customer services reopening though take-up is low and asked how the availability of the service was advertised when it was reinstated and if Berkhamsted and Tring councillors will be consulted on the results of the monitoring. H Peacock confirmed she would check on this and that members would be kept informed.

Outcome:

The report was noted.

11 LEISURE CONTRACT UPDATE

Full details can be found in the part 2 minutes.

12 WORK PROGRAMME

The following items were added to the work programme:

November – Leisure Contract Update (Ben Hosier)

Future items – Electric Vehicle Charging Points (Ben Hosier)

The Meeting ended at 9.58 pm.