



CORPORATE PPB ANNUAL REPORT

The Council faces severe financial constraints placed on it by 13 years of austerity cuts imposed by successive Conservative governments. The fact that we are still able to maintain services at an acceptable level is due to the diligence and dedication of Council Officers and Councillors working in partnership together. We are now faced with a budget underfund of £25 million over 3 years which means further savings and cuts must be found, so the budget process for 2024-2025 has begun.

The Finance Department is working diligently to ensure that Business Rates and Council Tax are collected in a timely and efficient way. The Benefits Division is working to get the Government's Household Support Fund out to all those families that are entitled to it, this is all taking place whilst administering the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction schemes.

A major cost to the council is the necessity to use agency workers to fill essential posts in social services and administrative areas; This is a problem other councils are having to deal with, caused by a variety of factors including pressure in the jobs market and the after effects of Covid. H.R services are working on training schemes to improve staff ability to rise through the structure as well as establishing a method of succession planning, making Halton an attractive employer.

The Health and Safety team continue to do excellent work in making sure all staff work safely and efficiently and are equipped to carry out their work.

In order to increase efficiency and make the council services even more accessible to residents and increase workforce flexibility the I.T Department is updating computer systems to improve security and make them more user friendly. And a major project is taking place to transfer all appropriate hard copy documents to digital formats making information and statistics gathering quicker.

Property Services Department is working to ensure council buildings are efficiently maintained and that provision of working space is achieved at an economic cost. They also manage multiple development projects across the Borough and successfully completed the Mersey Gateway Handback sites project. Great steps have been made in reducing energy costs by the installation of LED lighting and improving insulation. The new leisure centre

will be connected to the solar farm on St Michaels golf course and benefit from the installation Air source heat pumps will result in reducing heating costs. The Markets team has come forward with an in-depth 3-year plan to keep the market as a venue people will be delighted to use. To achieve this they will implement multiple advertising platforms by harnessing the latest online technology to spread the word to inform more people of what the market has to offer.

The DCBL stadium and catering team continue to strive to make the stadium an attractive and interesting venue for sporting events and recently also held a pop concert featuring Bryan Adams that drew in over 7,000 people.

The Legal Services Department continues to provide strong legal support to the Social Services teams as they cope with increased pressures. They also deal with the complex legal issues that arise from major project developments. The Member Services and Member Development Team works diligently to make sure Councillors are fully equipped and kept up to date and provided with the information necessary to carry out their roles.

I would like to thank my lead officer Mark Reaney for his help and support and members of the PPB for their hard work and commitment throughout the year.

Councillor Bob Gilligan – Chair,
Corporate Policy & Performance Board

MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During 2022/23, the Board comprised of eleven Councillors – R. Gilligan (Chair), G Philbin (Vice Chair), N Hutchinson, P Lloyd-Jones, A Lowe, N Plumpton-Walsh, G Stockton, A Teeling, S Thornton, K Wainwright and A Wall.

The Board is responsible for scrutinising performance and formulating policy in relation to Resources, HR and Training, ICT, Property, Democratic Services, Legal Services, Communications and Marketing, Stadium, Civic Catering, Procurement, Corporate Complaints and Area Forums. The Board also has responsibility for monitoring the performance of the reporting departments which during the last year have been Legal and Democratic Services including Communications and Marketing, Human Resources, Financial Services, ICT and Support Services and the Policy and Performance Divisions.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The full Board met four times during the year. Set out below are some of the main initiatives upon which it has worked during that time.

HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND 2022/23

The oversight of the administration of the fund was a very significant part of the Board's work throughout the year, with reports brought to each meeting. In June, the Board was advised that on 23 March 2022, the Government announced an extension to the Household Support Fund, which previously operated from October 2021 to March 2022. The Fund was intended to support vulnerable households particularly those including children and pensioners.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had issued guidance and grant allocations for councils, with the grant funding covering the period 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022. Halton's allocation of grant funding was £1,297,880 of which 5% was permitted to provide for the costs of administering the grant. A spending plan had been prepared regarding how the grant funding might be utilised via a combination of Council departments and voluntary sector partners, to deliver help and assistance to vulnerable households over the six month period. The plan would also provide a basis for monitoring spending against the grant, as required by the DWP and ensure that it was fully utilised in accordance with the grant guidance by 30 September 2022.

In order to ensure at least one third was allocated for vulnerable households with children, free school meal vouchers of £12 per week would once again be provided to approximately 7,500 eligible pupils at an estimated cost of £630,000 (summer half term holidays and summer school holidays). To support vulnerable pensioner households with at least one third of funding, all 4,303 pensioners currently receiving Council Tax Reduction would be provided with an award of £120. It was estimated that this would deliver approximately £516,360. The remaining grant (up to a third) would be used to assist other vulnerable households.

In September, the Board considered a report of the Operational Director – Finance, which provided an update on the progress of the delivery of the grant allocation received by the Council for the six month extension to the Fund. A spending plan had been prepared and was attached as Appendix A to the report. Detailed information relating to spending for the period 1 April to 30 June 2022 was included as Appendix B.

It was noted that the DWP were currently working through the design and governance of the new HSF for the period 1 November 2022 to 31 March 2023. No details of the scheme were as yet available however one change highlighted was there would be requirement to spend on particular groups of people as stipulated in the current HSF.

It was proposed that once the DWP had issued final guidance for the new HSF the Operational Director – Finance, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Corporate Policy and Performance Board (PPB), would recommend the new HSF scheme for approval by Executive Board.

At the November meeting, the Board received a report from the Operational Director, Finance, which updated Members on the progress from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023.

A Spending Plan had again been prepared and attached as an appendix. This demonstrated how the grant funding might be utilised via a combination of Council departments and the Voluntary Sector to deliver help and assistance to vulnerable households over the six month period.

It was suggested that the Household Support Fund be promoted in various places e.g. schools and nurseries to ensure people are aware of its availability.

In January, it was noted that good progress was being made with the distribution of the latest Fund. Of the total £1,297,880 available grant allocation, £785,105 had to date been paid to eligible households Preparations are being made to administer the extension of the Household Support Fund from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and also the new Energy Bills Alternative Funding Scheme, once Government guidance and grant allocations are received for each.

RESOURCING THE COUNCIL

In September, the Board considered a report of the Operational Director – Policy, People, Performance & Efficiency, which provided Members with an overall view of the resourcing challenges currently faced by the Council, their impact, implications and options.

It was noted since the start of 2021/22 financial year, the number of Council service vacancies submitted for advertisement had increased significantly. The rise in numbers had created a significant challenge as the Council's recruitment service was not resourced at a level sufficient to manage workflow of such

volumes. This had created delays in service provision, which remained prevalent. The key reasons for the increase in volume of vacancies were set out in the report. However, in addition to these reasons, there was also a failure to attract candidates to some roles which resulted in re-advertising and repeated recruitment activity.

The Board was also advised that the recruitment service also processed recruitment for school on a chargeable SLA basis. 45 schools had bought into the service and Members were updated on revised legislation in respect of school recruitment which was introduced in April 2020 and the impact this had on the recruitment service.

Members noted data outlined in the report which showed an upswing in vacancies across both the public and private sectors and in particular across the Liverpool City Region (LCR). All local authorities in the LCR were reporting recruitment issues and certain post types continued to provide the highest level of challenge across the city region, namely social worker roles, caring posts in the adult care sector, nursing posts in the adult care sector, technical and professional roles across a broad range of service areas and more recently administrative type posts.

In order to address some of the recruitment issues experienced, a revised approach to attracting candidates to Council roles was to be explored. The report detailed the measures which were under consideration as part of this new approach. In addition, the Council was also engaged in a strategic programme of work with the other five LCR Council's headed up by the Chief Executive of the LCR Combined Authority, designed to consider the high level challenge of resourcing the local government sector more generally in the short, medium and long term.

ENERGY / CARBON REDUCTION

In January, the Board considered a wide-ranging report which provided an update on related activities aimed at reducing the Council's impact on the environment and CO2 emissions. Since it started to measure its carbon emissions in 2006/2007, overall emissions have reduced in the Council's operations from 26,338 tonnes of CO2 to 9,327 tonnes.

The Council was given guidelines by the Government in 2009 that public bodies would aim to reduce their carbon emissions by 30% of their 2009 carbon emission baseline by 2020. The Council calculated its baseline carbon emissions in 2009 as 26,825 carbon tonnes. In reporting year 2020, the Council had reduced its carbon emissions to 11,354 carbon tonnes. This was a reduction of 57%. In 2017, the Government reset the baseline in the expectation that

public bodies would reduce their carbon emissions by 50% by 2031.

The Council's 2017 baseline was 14,811 carbon tonnes. In reporting year 2021/22, the Council had managed to reduce its carbon emissions to 9,327 tonnes. This is a reduction of 37%. In 2020/21, emissions were 9770 tonnes of CO₂. For 2021/22, the overall emissions have reduced to 9327 tonnes, a further reduction of 4.5%.

The report covered a number of the Council's initiatives in detail.

PERFORMANCE ISSUES DURING THE COURSE OF THE YEAR

The Board considered in detail the performance of the reporting departments. Issues which were overseen during the year included:

- Accident statistics
- Markets
- School catering and the operation of the Stadium

WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

During 2022/23, the Board retained the expanded Topic Group which oversaw the operation of the Council's Discretionary Support Scheme and included scrutiny of Universal Credit. The Board agreed that additional topic groups would be established when the need arose.