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**To: Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board**

**On: 2 September 2020**

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**Report by: Director of Finance and Resources**

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**Heading: Finance and Resources Service Update**

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## **1. Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides an update to the Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board with a summary of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the areas within the Board's remit since March 2020. It also outlines the key priorities and areas of risk through to autumn, highlighting any key areas of risk.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 It is recommended that members of the Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board:
- note the content of this report.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1 In March 2020, working closely with our partners, Renfrewshire Council moved quickly to respond to the emerging coronavirus pandemic, protecting and supporting our employees and communities, particularly vulnerable people across the area.
- 3.2 Colleagues across the Council have shown great commitment and resilience during the pandemic delivering essential services, volunteering to support frontline services and helping others to remain safe at home.

- 3.3 In order to ensure effective decision-making and governance, the Emergencies Board was convened on 20 March 2020 and has received regular updates on the different workstreams established to support Renfrewshire throughout the crisis, highlighting the humanitarian response, reviewing the available data showing the impact on Renfrewshire's people and considering how we can restart services, recover and renew. Detailed reports were also presented to the Council on 25 June 2020.
- 3.4 This report is therefore not intended to provide granular detail of the response, it is to give a broad overview of the key areas impacted by the Covid-19 crisis – the service areas paused and restarted, the particular areas of focus now and in the near future and any specific risks and priorities of relevance to this Policy Board.
- 3.5 Whilst this report is a high-level update for Elected Members, we are acutely aware of the impact the pandemic has had on our communities - of those who have sadly been bereaved, have struggled through isolation, have lost their income, have had their health impacted through this crisis, have supported their children and young people with home learning or have contended with other challenges made more difficult by the pandemic and consequent restrictions. Across services, and with our partners, the Council continues to support our communities and develop our operational and policy response both now and as we continue to move through the recovery route map.

#### **4 Updates for Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board**

- 4.1 Finance and Resources Services responded, adapted and changed their approaches to service delivery to ensure communities and staff were supported over the last six months. This section of the report sets out the key changes for the service during the pandemic, critical service areas that continued and any services or projects that were required to be paused.
- 4.2 The Contact Centre very quickly moved to a virtual call centre with all staff working from home to provide a telephone service for essential calls only. Service level has remained above the target of 70% of calls answered in 40 seconds. The call centre received 112,491 calls since the start of lockdown (23<sup>rd</sup> March) up to 31 July and answered 95% of these, with an overall service level of 75% of calls answered in 40 seconds.
- 4.3 Face to face provision in all three Customer Service locations closed at the start of lockdown, with services moved online backed up by phone support where required - this included benefits and Council Tax. Customers have been supported to continue to make payments online or in their local areas via Post Office or Paypoint. The Contact Centre, supported by Advice Works staff took on the Shielding and Scottish Government national helplines, and support was enhanced by the creation of new digital forms for online completion, where customers were comfortable with this.

- 4.4 The registration team supported those customers who lost family members to the virus and other reasons by the continued registration of deaths remotely. It moved from providing a service across three locations to an online service for death registrations only. This involved relocating the registration staff to the Community Safety Hub in Paisley and the extension of the service from a five day to a seven day per week service. The service has now relocated again to 5 High Street, Paisley, to accommodate the change in Government guidance requiring the clearing of the backlog in birth registrations. This meant the re-introduction of face to face appointments with members of the public. The service has also recommenced marriage and civil partnership ceremonies included the re-opening of the marriage suite at Renfrewshire House.
- 4.5 Digital services developed and delivered a suite of online application forms and digital processes for services, including Business Support Grants, Free School Meals and Clothing Grants, Early Years applications, and licensing applications for our customers. This advancement of the Council's digital capability has allowed services to move online with little disruption to service delivery.
- 4.5 Council Tax recovery action was paused for a minimum of three months in recognition of the challenge many people found themselves in, customers were actively encouraged to contact the service to change payment start dates and agree changes to payment schedules. This is recognised in the reduction in council tax collected compared with the same period last year- Council Tax collection at 28 July 2020 was 40.54%, which was 1.08% down on the equivalent period last year. Since mid-July customers who routinely paid Council Tax in previous years, but who haven't paid so far this year, have been contacted to discuss their circumstances and offer support ahead of the reminder and recovery process restarting in the coming weeks.
- 4.6 Business rates annual billing was delayed until July to take account of the new Covid related reliefs introduced by Scottish Government and the team are now supporting businesses in relation to payment arrangements. As a result, the first payment for those paying monthly was due to be paid on 7 August 2020, with businesses that pay twice yearly payments not making their first payment until the end of August. Non-Domestic Rates collection was 1.87% compared to 29.60% as at 28 July 2019 (down 27.73%). The Business Team has also supported activities required to help local businesses apply for newly launched government support grants.
- 4.7 During the pandemic, both the benefits team and Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) team experienced an increase in enquiries from individuals and families whose financial circumstances had been affected, as is highlighted below:
- Universal Credit (UC) caseload data provided by DWP highlights that the number of people claiming UC in Renfrewshire doubled between 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020 and 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2020, going from 7,783 to 14,756 over that four-month period
  - Discretionary Housing Payment awards increased by £10K year to date compared with the same period last year

- 1,600 additional customers provided with Council Tax payment support, including direct contact with over 100 customers, not digitally enabled.
- 19,372 households receiving Council Tax reduction at the end of July 2020, this is up by 1,646 from the July 2019 count of 17,726 (9.29% increase).
- Year to date spend on Crisis Grants (CGs) at the end of July was £282,175.93 (2,914 awards), resulting in 421 more awards and £91,432.25 more spent than at the end of July 2019.
- 620 of these awards (£73,780.43) were directly Covid-19 related, with other Crisis Grants amounting to £208,395.50 (2,294 awards).

- 4.8 It is also important to note that since June the level of Covid related applications CGs has also reduced, meaning that overall spend on SWF for both Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants is lower than at the same period last year. The annual SWF budget, including the additional Covid allocation from Scottish Government continues to be carefully monitored.
- 4.9 The Health and Safety Team have been responding to national developments in terms of coronavirus testing, and services across the Council continue to be supported by the team to refer eligible employees and their households for testing. Full HR support and communication has been provided to all staff members to ensure they remained fully informed of the developing situation and, where appropriate and practical, have been supported to work safely at home, or to safely return to active work once recovered or free of recommended self-isolation periods. There is a dedicated Health, Safety and Wellbeing at Work section on the Council's website, it includes advice on PPE, carrying out a home visit, and a staff wellbeing guide, whilst regular wellbeing features have been communicated in staff newsletters throughout the pandemic.
- 4.10 The ongoing recruitment of essential staff such as care workers, cleaners and teachers, has continued by using digital means. The service also worked closely with national government, partners and trade unions to actively manage and redeploy staffing resources to meet the most critical services over the emergency period.
- 4.11 The Finance Team have produced the annual accounts, rebased budgets for the 2020/21 financial year, produced the first set of budget monitoring reports and also put in place specific cost monitoring processes in relation to the costs of responding to the pandemic. Support to budget holders has remained in place with considerable use being made of video meeting facilities to enable this.
- 4.12 ICT Services were proactive and upscaled the remote access infrastructure anticipating increased usage (i.e. up to 4,000 connections) prior to lockdown. This increase in capacity was tested up-front with high volumes of remote connections via Edinburgh-based cloud hosted data centres, as part of the adoption of Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS). Internal remote-control software tools were also reconfigured to enable the seamless support of Council provisioned end-user devices in the office or at home. This enabled the successful rapid transition from office working to home working at the start of lockdown

- 4.13 ICT has continued to capitalise on the Microsoft O365 tool, which has allowed staff for anytime/anywhere conferencing, collaboration and information sharing, this has provided the ability for newly created teams to be established and effective in delivering critical services for Renfrewshire's most vulnerable. ICT have continued to configure and deploy new end user devices providing additional staff with the ability to work from home during the current pandemic, this has all been supported by Microsoft O365 training courses being made available for staff.
- 4.14 The Internal Audit Team are continuing to deliver the annual audit plan as business as usual. While, the counter fraud team suspended routine fraud investigation work and home visits and is concentrating on mitigating the new fraud risks which have developed as part of the responses to the pandemic. Risk Management has supported the CMT in the response to the pandemic and in the lessons learned exercise.
- 4.15 Committee Services has supported the move from physical meetings of the Council and its Boards to online meetings. This included: the establishment of weekly online meetings of the Emergencies Board; the first ever meeting of the Council held remotely; and holding school placing request appeals, which allowed parents to participate in those hearings. The Council is now undertaking a full cycle of meetings held remotely using video technology.
- 4.16 The Licensing Service has responded to the reopening of licensed premises and the return to work of many taxi and private hire drivers. This has caused an increase in demand. However, the service will be impacted by the loss of income from licensing fees and fees for weddings and civil partnerships during lockdown.
- 4.17 The Right for Renfrewshire programme was paused during the pandemic to allow staff and services to focus on the emergency response to Covid-19. This means the changes planned for 2020/21 have been delayed and staff that had accepted an offer of VER/VR were asked to postpone their leaving date to 31 March 2021.
- 4.18 Recently, the service has been working closely with Children Services colleagues to ensure that schools would be ready to open in mid-August. This included processing the recruitment arrangements for teachers, both supply and probationers, and for the additional cleaning staff required, as well as ensuring that all administrative support was in place for all schools.
- 4.19 Across Finance and Resources staff moved quickly to home working, with minimal disruption to service provision, ensuring critical services were delivered and additional support provided where needed, such as maintaining frontline services for HSCP, providing administrative support for child protection cases, and supporting the introduction of furlough arrangements for Renfrewshire Leisure staff. Several staff were also redeployed to assist with the delivery of essential services to the community.

Throughout, staff had a positive 'can do' attitude and desire to help communities, which included Architects, Project Managers and Estates staff using their spare time to help clean schools; Internal Audit officers working on the Local Assistance Team to assist those individuals shielding; administration staff supporting the essential worker Childcare hubs; and Surveyors, Energy Officers and Clerk of Works doing driving duties to help Environment & Infrastructure deliver essential services.

## **5. Key priorities and risks until next board cycle**

### **5.1 Priority areas for the service until the next board cycle include:**

- **Ensuring financial sustainability** – the focus over the coming weeks is clarifying the financial implications of the pandemic, both in the current year and future years, developing short term solutions to address the substantial costs and income losses being incurred in year and assessing the impact of this on the Council's medium to longer term financial plans.
- **Supporting customers** – on the anticipated increase in demand for benefits, financial and debt advice as they adapt to new personal circumstances. Also, to provide support for customers as Council Tax payments become due, by ensuring that customers are receiving all the support they can in relation to Council Tax reduction and in agreeing rescheduled payment arrangements. Monitoring the impact on Council Tax collection and business rate collection will be a key consideration in the coming weeks and months.
- **Customer Service Centre** – will be operating in a reduced capacity going forward due to social distancing guidelines, with the majority of the service continuing to be operated remotely. Face to face customer service provision for those that still need a level of support and that can be delivered in accordance with the relevant guidance on social distancing will be done, this would also include the following services: complex housing benefit/Council Tax reductions and Council Tax, other licences, death and birth registrations and Blue Badge mobility assessments.
- **Safety and wellbeing of our workforce** – to plan and support the safe return to workplaces, where appropriate, for staff. In line with current Government policy, most staff will continue to be supported to work from home and HR will continue to support services with recruitment and grievance matters remotely. As the Council's Values were launched in June 2020 and alongside the recovery workstreams, it is an appropriate time to review and update key HR policies, such as absence, flexible and home working policies, to reflect both the new values and the new ways of working.

- **Ongoing enhanced ICT support** – will continue for both office and home working technologies and business as usual activities. ICT is identifying new technology solutions which could provide real benefit to the Council and to home workers. This includes the development of a Bring Your Own Device solution for personal smartphone or tablet use, and the technical and security requirements to support personal laptop access to Council systems, should that be necessary.
- **Revising internal audit plan** - to amend the plan for the remainder of the year to provide post event assurance in a number of risk areas. In addition, plans are being put in place to return to routine fraud investigation work from August 2020 and Risk Management profile is being reviewed as well as providing ongoing support to the CMT to develop contingency arrangements for any possible spike in Covid-19 cases.
- **Full registration service** - is to be available for the registration of births deaths and marriages subject to whatever restriction remain in place in guidance and legislation. Including, relocating back to Renfrewshire House and the opening of registration services at Renfrew and Johnstone Town Halls.

5.2 In terms of risk, the Board should note that the Corporate Risk Management Group is undertaking a piece of work to review the Council's risk profile in light of the pandemic; many of the existing strategic and corporate risks will be impacted. These risks will be reported to the Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board in November. At this point in time however, the Board will wish to note that the service-specific risks relating to our recovery work and immediate concerns between now and the next cycle of Board meetings are:

- safety of the workforce as some return to Council buildings and the ongoing wellbeing of all;
  - potential contractor's claims for Extensions of Time and Costs for construction contract delays caused by the pandemic;
  - suitability of governance arrangements of Council Boards;
  - financial sustainability of the Council; and
  - balancing the need to operate 'normally' with a need to have robust and detailed contingency arrangements, regularly updated in line with current guidance, in place in the event of restrictions being re-imposed.
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## Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – Any financial impact from Covid-19 referenced in this report will be progressed through the Council's financial & budget planning process.
2. **HR & Organisational Development** – Any staffing changes from Covid-19 referenced in this report will be progressed through the Council's HR policies, including home working and flexible working.
3. **Community/Council Planning** – Covid-19 will impact on the operations of Council partners and on services to the community. This paper highlights the work being undertaken to mitigate this impact as far as possible and maintain essential services for the safety and wellbeing of the community.
4. **Legal** – None
5. **Property/Assets-** the majority of Council facilities have remained close to comply with the initial lockdown guidance. As facilities start to open in line with the Scottish Government Routemap, adjustment may have to be made to physical spaces to allow for physical distancing and to comply with relevant guidance. This will also apply to outdoor assets
6. **Information Technology** – ICT are working to ensure staff have the capability to work from home wherever possible to reduce social contact in line with government and health guidance
7. **Equality & Human Rights**
  - (a) The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report. Yet the Council will need to continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 and the disproportionate impacts it may have on certain communities or groups of people across Renfrewshire.
8. **Health & Safety** – Advice and guidance is being given to protect the health and safety of employees and service users when carrying out priority services for the Council in line with government and health guidance
9. **Procurement** – None
10. **Risk** – Corporate Risk Management Group is undertaking a piece of work to review the Council's risk profile in light of the pandemic; many of the existing strategic and corporate risks will be impacted
11. **Privacy Impact** - None.



**12. COSLA Policy Position** – COSLA Leaders had ongoing dialogue in relation to emerging issues, with specific work being undertaken in relation to the significant financial constraints facing local authorities and education recovery amongst others.

**13. Climate Risk** – None

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**List of Background Papers - none**

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