
Report To:	Policy & Resources Committee	Date:	1 February 2022
Report By:	Interim Director Finance & Corporate Governance	Report No:	FIN/04/22/AP/LA
Contact Officer:	Alan Puckrin	Contact No:	01475 712223
Subject:	Finance Services - Update		

1.0 PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Committee on various matters within the remit of Finance Services and to seek decisions as appropriate.

2.0 SUMMARY

- 2.1 Over the Festive period and the first 2 weeks of January demand for Self-Isolation Support Grants increased exponentially compared to mid-December. Many applicants were unable to get through to the Discretionary Payments Team which resulted in understandable concern and complaints. The relaxation of self-isolation rules has to date has not relieved the pressure on the team due to the continued high level of transmission within Inverclyde plus the backlog of applicants who were unable to contact the Council in early January.
- 2.2 Extra resources were drafted in from other Council services and the extent of the backlog is being monitored daily. Even so it will be several more weeks before the team's workload position will return to the level before the Omicron variant. Priority continues to be given to processing Crisis Grants, the demand for which has also increased.
- 2.3 A £100 Winter Hardship Support Payment was agreed by the Council on 2nd December 2021 as part of a suite of measures to support low income households. Most have received their payment directly into their bank account with the remainder due their payments due during January 2022.
- 2.4 Adjustments will be needed to the current DHP criteria to ensure 2022/23 expenditure is contained within the £160,000 expected budget. The DHP categories including the proposed changes to the policy to take effect from 1st April 2022 are attached at Appendix 1.
- 2.5 The latest published data shows that 7122 households and 9134 adults in Inverclyde are on Universal Credit. There has been limited impact of the withdrawal of the temporary £20 Covid uplift in the number of Crisis Grants paid to those on UC. The number of grants paid each month between April and September was on average 151 compared with 167 in October and 150 in November. The position will continue to be monitored and reported.
- 2.6 As part of the current Budget process a review of the future ICT Capital investment levels required to maintain the increased volume of laptops and ancillary kit rolled out due to Covid has been under taken. The matter was considered and supported by the MBWG and as such will be incorporated into the proposals to be considered by the Council later this month.
- 2.7 CMT have approved the renewal of Digital 360 EDRMS licences, the provision of support and maintenance services for a further 5 years and to upgrade the Digital Image Server. Included in the agreement is an Enterprise License that will allow the system to be deployed across all parts of the Council at no further expense for individual services apart from a one-off cost of £75,000.

2.8 Appendix 2 provides an updated action plans for both the ICT Strategy and Digital Strategy. It can be seen that good progress is being made with a number of actions now completed.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 It is recommended that Committee note the significant work pressures within the Revenues & Benefits team in relation to Covid related grant payments which is in addition to the core workload.

3.2 It is recommended that Committee approve the revised Discretionary Housing Payment Policy to be applied from 1.4.2022 attached at Appendix 1.

3.3 It is recommended that Committee notes the current position of various ICT projects and that a request for increased capital investment in ICT will be included in the 2022/25 Capital Programme for the Council to consider later this month.

Alan Puckrin
Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Governance

4.0 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Revenues & Benefits team have had a key role in delivering new services arising from Covid since March 2020 with the payments of thousands of business grants, low income pandemic payments on behalf of the Scottish Government plus local schemes supporting CTR recipients and Self- Isolation Support Grants.
- 4.2 In a similar vein the ICT team have had unprecedented levels of work arising from the initial roll out of extra kit, setting up employees and Members for home working and supporting the on going delivery of remote/hybrid meetings plus remote/hybrid education delivery.

5.0 REVENUES & BENEFITS UPDATE

5.1 Self-Isolation Support Grants

The eligibility criteria for the £500 Self-Isolation Support Grant (SISG) delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government was expanded in December to align with the more rigorous self-isolation rules introduced to contain the spread of the Omicron variant. In the period over Christmas and the first 2 weeks of January demand for support increased exponentially compared to mid-December. Over and above this there were many applicants who could not register their application due to the level of demand. A Scotland wide survey indicated increases in demand of between 300%-1500% compared to the same time last year. The relaxation of self-isolation rules has had limited impact to date due to the backlog of applicants and levels of transmission within Inverclyde.

- 5.2 Extra resources were drafted in from other Council services but as the SISG process is not straight forward, a period of training and bedding in is required resulting in an increasing backlog. The extent of the backlog is being monitored daily and as at 18 January the backlog of applications was 179 with 47 potential applicants to be called back. An online initial application form is being developed and once implemented is likely to increase the backlog further. In light of this it can be seen that it will be several more weeks before the team's workload position will return to the level before the Omicron variant. The position reflects the impact of this and other Covid related increases in workload on day to day business. An update will be provided at the Committee.

5.3 Winter Hardship Support Payment

A £100 Winter Hardship Support Payment was agreed by the Council on 2nd December 2021 as part of a suite of measures to support low income households from Inverclyde's share of £25million in flexible funding. 700 low income households not supported by any other locally agreed scheme during 2021 received a letter in December 2021 advising payment arrangements. Most will receive their payment directly where bank account details are held, others have been asked to apply along with a copy of their bank statement. Payments are scheduled to be made during January 2022.

5.4 Discretionary Housing Payments

The DHP allocation for purposes other than the mitigation of the Social Sector Size Criteria in 2021/22 is £229,000. This includes a one off Covid related grant of £69,000. DHP "other" expenditure based on applications received up to November 2021, expected to be paid until 31st March 2022 is £225,000. While the additional funding will meet the current DHP policy priority criteria, adjustments will be needed to ensure 2022/23 expenditure is contained within budget, expected to be £160,000.

- 5.5 Officers have reviewed expenditure against each priority category and recommend reducing the excess weekly income threshold from £50 to £20. An exception to the proposal is to maintain the current level of support for private rented sector applicants deemed to be in exceptional circumstances.

The DHP categories including the proposed changes to the policy to take effect from 1st April 2022 are attached at Appendix 1. A category met by additional funding during 2020/21 supporting private rented sector tenants directly affected by Covid-19, has been removed. Applicants who meet the financial assessment will however continue to be supported, although to a lesser degree, under a Financial Hardship category.

5.6 Scottish Welfare Fund

The Scottish Welfare Fund helped 295 families move home in the 7 months to 31st October 2021, an increase of 195 during the same period in 2020/21. Grants averaging £950 for those who met the qualifying criteria paid for items including carpeting and white goods and accounted for £280,000 (56%) Community Care Grant (CCG) expenditure during that period; This compared with £100,000 spent on house moves during the same period during 2020/21.

5.7 Scottish Welfare Fund 2021/22 core funding of £756,000 was supplemented by £168,000 carried forward from a Covid-19 allocation received during 2020/21. The additional funding has helped meet the extra demand on the budget. It also permitted the application priority level to be extended to Medium priority applications until August 2021 when the priority level returned to High to contain expenditure within budget. An additional allocation of £110,000 Winter Hardship Support to the Community Care Grant budget was approved by the December Council and this will ensure there is sufficient budget to fund approved grants in the coming months.

5.8 The level of new build social rented properties planned to be released to new tenants will slow down during 2022/23 with 181 properties planned compared with 460 during 2021/22 meaning demand on Community Care Grant funding in these circumstances will reduce. Scottish Government funding for Scottish Welfare Fund is frozen for 2022/23 and expenditure will be kept under close review to ensure grants are awarded only in the circumstances where it can be clearly demonstrated that the award will have an immediate and significant impact.

5.9 A Winter Hardship Support allocation of £40,000 to the Crisis Grant budget will ensure those in crisis over the winter period receive the level of grant needed to meet increased food and fuel costs. The new funding allows for an anticipated 20% increase in number of approved grant applications whilst each grant is increased by a further 20% above the current 20% increase on the standard grant level agreed in April 2020.

5.10 Other Matters

The Covid-19 Tenant Grant Fund launched during November 2021 with communications sent directly to all registered Private Rented Sector landlords, engagement with RSLs, a social media campaign and a press release. Enquiries and applications are being assessed against the rigorous evidential requirements of the fund and officers are confident Inverclyde's £93,000 share of national funding will be allocated in full. A progress report was submitted to the Scottish Government in December and a further update will be provided in March.

5.11 The latest published data shows that 7122 households and 9134 adults in Inverclyde are on Universal Credit. There has been limited impact of the withdrawal of the temporary £20 Covid uplift in the number of Crisis Grants paid to those on UC. The number of grants paid each month between April and September was on average 151 compared with 167 in October and 150 in November. The position will continue to be monitored and reported.

6.0 ICT UPDATE

6.1 As part of the current Budget process a review of the future investment levels required to maintain the increased volume of laptops and ancillary kit rolled out due to Covid has been undertaken. Between the increase of 700 laptops for officers and 1100 within the school estate then, even after taking into account the reduction in the level of desktops required, there is a need to increase the annual capital allocation by £230,000.

6.2 The matter was considered and supported by the MBWG and as such will be incorporated into the proposals to be considered by the Council later this month.

- 6.3 Civica Digital 360 is the corporate Electronic Document Management Solution (EDRMS). It was first implemented in 2013 and is extensively used in Revenues and Benefits and HSCP. It is planned to deploy further modules as part of the New Ways of Working programme as it was recognised as a key tool for the successful implementation of home and remote working.
- 6.4 CMT have approved the renewal of Digital 360 EDRMS licences, the provision of support and maintenance services for a further 5 years and to upgrade the Digital Image Server as part of the list of Contracts in the Negotiated Contracts policy agreed at CMT in November 2019. Included in the agreement is an Enterprise License that will allow the system to be deployed across all parts of the council at no further expense for individual services apart from a one-off cost of £75,000.
- 6.5 The costs will be contained in existing ICT budgets with the exception of the Enterprise Licence cost which will be met from the Cloud earmarked reserve.
- 6.6 A core requirement of the Council's ICT & Digital Strategies is the implementation of Cloud Based tools including migration to Microsoft 365. Procurement through the Scottish Government Framework Agreement has been completed. Initial "onboarding" to the Microsoft Cloud Platform has begun. A pilot programme is proceeding within ICT Services before being rolled out to the wider estate. A project timeline and roll-out programme has been developed and is in the process of agreement. A number of project sub-projects are being established to work with Services to communicate progress.
- 6.7 Appendix 2 provides an updated action plans for both the ICT Strategy and Digital Strategy. It can be seen that good progress is being made with a number of actions now completed.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Finance

There are no financial implications to be highlighted in this report over and above the considerable levels of funding being distributed to businesses and members of the public by the Council on behalf of the Scottish Government.

Financial Implications:

One off Costs

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	Budget Years	Proposed Spend this Report	Virement From	Other Comments
N/A					

Annually Recurring Costs/ (Savings)

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	With Effect from	Annual Net Impact	Virement From (If Applicable)	Other Comments
ICT	Capital Refresh	2022/23	£230,000		Subject to approval as part of the 2022/25 Capital Programme

7.2 Legal

There are no legal implications to highlight in this report.

7.3 Human Resources

There are no HR implications to highlight in this report.

7.4 Equalities

Equalities

(a) Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out?

	YES (see attached appendix)
X	NO – This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a substantive change to an existing policy, function or strategy. Therefore, no Equality Impact Assessment is required

(b) Fairer Scotland Duty

If this report affects or proposes any major strategic decision:-

Has there been active consideration of how this report's recommendations reduce inequalities of outcome?

	YES – A written statement showing how this report's recommendations reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage has been completed.
X	NO

(c) Data Protection

Has a Data Protection Impact Assessment been carried out?

	YES – This report involves data processing which may result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of individuals.
X	NO

7.5 Repopulation

There are no repopulation issues arising from this report.

8.0 CONSULTATIONS

8.1 No specific consultations were required when preparing this report.

9.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

9.1 None.

DHP Policy – April 2022

Appendix 1

Category	Circumstances	Maximum Duration of Award/ Award to be reviewed	Amount of DHP (up to the stated % of the shortfall between HB and the rent charge – or otherwise stated)	Examples of Supporting Evidence	Changes from Previous Policy
1	Claimants affected by the Social Sector Size Criteria (Working Age Housing Benefit claimants living in Housing Association tenancies)	For the full financial year	100% of the SSSC reduction	HB records	
2a.	Claimants supported by the Homelessness Service in the Private Rented Sector	12 months	100%	Homelessness records	
2b.	Claimants supported by the Homelessness Service or from Temporary Accommodation into Social Sector housing	One- off payment	Up to the equivalent of 1 week's rent charge for the new tenancy	Housing Association notification Lease agreement	Added those supported from temporary accommodation
2c.	Benefit Cap	Until end of financial year	75%	HB records	
3a.	Financial Hardship – Less than £20 income over expenditure each week	Until end of financial year	75%	Claimant statement/HB Assessment	Reduced from £50 to £20 per week
3b.	Financial Hardship – Less than £20 income over expenditure each week – aged less than 35years and housed private rented sector	Until end of financial year	100%	Claimant statement/HB Assessment	Reduced from £50 to £20 per week
3c	Financial Hardship – Less than £50 income over expenditure each week – housed in the private rented sector and in exceptional circumstances	Until end of financial year	100%	Claimant statement/HB Assessment	

Notes

DHP is awarded in order of priority with applications meeting the criteria for Category 1 being the first priority to Category 3 being the lowest priority

Category 1

- Applicants in category 1 are not subject to a financial assessment

Category 2

- Applicants in category 2 are subject to a financial assessment. Applicants are approved where income is less than £20 more than essential expenditure. Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, Attendance Allowance and Scottish Disability Payments are disregarded as income although all other income is taken into consideration.
- Awards for claimants supported by the Homelessness Service in the Private Rented Sector are limited to the equivalent of the difference between the HB award and one rate above the LHA rate for the household's requirements or the LHA 2 room rate, whichever is higher. Affordability of those supported by the Homelessness service or from temporary accommodation will be monitored closely subject to an upper annual budget of £10k.
- Those affected by the Benefit Cap renting in the social sector – DHP is awarded based on the difference between HB and the rent charge
- Those affected by the Benefit Cap renting in the private rented sector – DHP is awarded based on the difference between HB and the LHA rate applicable to the household's requirements, unless determined to be exceptional circumstances.

Category 3

- Applicants are approved where income is less than £20 more than essential expenditure. Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, Attendance Allowance and Scottish Disability Payments are disregarded as income although all other income is taken into consideration. This category will also be monitored closely and could be subject to review depending on the level of spend.
- In the private rented sector DHP is awarded based on the difference between HB or UC Housing costs and the LHA rate applicable to the household's requirements or the 1 room rate for those aged under 35 years
- In the social sector DHP is awarded based on the difference between HB entitlement or UC Housing costs and the rent charge
- Private rented sector claimants subject to Local Housing Allowance restrictions who are in "exceptional circumstances". Award DHP to meet the difference between HB or UC housing costs and one LHA rate above the rate applicable to the household's requirements with a limit of the 2 room rate for those aged less than 35 years. Exceptional circumstances being situations that are particularly challenging and for an identifiable and specific reason, normally beyond the applicant's control and more than the financial pressure experienced by most people who rely on welfare benefits. Exceptional circumstances may be when support is provided by Macmillan Cancer Support or similar organisation; those with terminal medical conditions; unexpected personal or family problems or illness.

Date: January 2022

ICT Strategy Action Plan 2021 – 2024

Action Area 1	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Asset Management Programme & Cloud Migration Strategy	Hardware Refresh Programme reviewed to reflect new ways of working	Sufficient Funding in place March 2022 Staff have the appropriate equipment to work effectively and efficiently from the most appropriate location From 2023	Sustainable refresh programme embedded Staff satisfaction surveys reflect confidence in IT Services. Line Managers are satisfied that staff have appropriate equipment	Members Budget Working group support need for increased investment. Standard specification for equipment agreed by CMT. Hybrid working options being identified by Organisational Recovery Group	Chief Financial Officer/ICT Service Manager ICT Service Manager
	Education Services – review services provided to schools to reflect new ways of teaching and delivery	Strategy approved and funding agreed March 2022 Students and Staff have the appropriate equipment to learn in a flexible and rewarding way. From 2023	Sustainable funding model approved Feedback from Education Services reflect satisfaction in service delivery	Extra funding proposed from 2022/25 Capital budget and Education Budget. Digital strategy approved at Education & Communities Committee 02/11/21 Complete	ICT Service Manager
	Cloud Migration Strategy	Deliver Office 365 Licensing and implement initial Cloud Migration From August 2021 Agree approach to deliver Telephony and other Communications Systems in the Cloud March 2022	Cloud services including MS Teams deployed to staff Contracts awarded for new Telephony approach	Contract Awarded August 2021. Project timeline developed and agreed Supplier engagement and Options appraisal continuing.	ICT Service Manager

Action Area 2	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Service Provision	Maintain Service Levels across Support Services	Meet agreed Service Level Targets for Incident and Service Requests.	Customer satisfaction with service provided	SLA Statistics reported to P&R	ICT Service Manager
	Core Systems	Ongoing through life of Strategy Engage with services to ensure that existing systems are being used effectively. Focussing on collaboration and communication tools including the Cisco telephony systems, Customer Management and EDRIMS. March 2022	Services have access to the tools and functions required to provide effective efficient services to customers and staff.	Complete Report to CMT February 2022 on medium term plans for Core Systems	ICT Service Manager

Action Area 3	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Information Security	Network and System Security	<p>Maintain a Secure Network Infrastructure</p> <p>Support the Information Governance group in dealing with the individual data management responsibilities of each member of staff.</p> <p>Ongoing through life of Strategy</p>	<p>Minimise Cyber Security Incidents,</p> <p>Corporate approach to data handling and electronic document management.</p>	<p>P&R Report to be included as part of Security Accreditation Compliance programme.</p>	ICT Service Manager
	Security Accreditation Compliance	<p>Use of industry partners to provide Security Assurance through the Penetration Test & IT Health check process.</p> <p>Ongoing through life of Strategy</p> <p>Maintain Cyber Essentials Plus and PSN Code of Connection compliance/accreditation</p> <p>Annual Compliance Process</p>	<p>Provision of report and implementation of recommendations</p> <p>PSN Compliance Certificate</p>	<p>PSN Accreditation in place for 2021/22</p> <p>Schedule to be developed for accreditation and penetration testing/Cyber Security Audit for 2022/23</p>	ICT Service Manager

Appendix 2 Page 4

Action Area 4	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Procurement Strategy	Use of National Frameworks to deliver value for money services	National frameworks the default approach for available systems and services	Delivery of Value for Money Systems and Services	Two contracts awarded via Scottish Government Frameworks in August 2. Further contract placed via GCloud December 2021	ICT Service Manager
	Account Management	Meet with suppliers to review and ensure best value and most efficient levels of delivery and support of systems	Appropriate level of supplier support and best value delivery	Fully Adopted Supplier meetings ongoing	ICT Service Manager
	Project Management	Use temporary increase in Project Management resources to deliver support to services in planning and deploying projects and services	Business Cases are developed and projects are delivered on time and on budget	Fully Adopted Candidate appointed August 2021	ICT Service Manager
				Complete	

Digital Strategy Action Plan 2021 – 2024 Update

Action Area 1	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Provide Improved online Services	Work with suppliers to fully enable the ability of customers to book and pay for calendared and transactional services such as bulky uplifts.	Allow customers to book & pay for services online. Increase the range of services available via Web Self-Service October 2021	Delivery of extended range of services available.	First tranche of Online Forms are live. Integration with new payment engine pending. COMPLETE	ICT Service Manager with Heads of Service.
	Review and Develop additional services to be Digitized or enhance existing online services to provide additional functionality	Additional Services available online March 2022	Delivery of extended range of services available. Over Strategy Period	DMTs to be visited to discuss opportunities for migrating services online Ongoing	ICT Service Manager with Heads of Service

Action Area 2	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria/Target Date	Update	Responsibility
Channel Shift	Open new channels of communication including messaging and Social Media routes Increase convenience for customers.	The number of ways customers can interact with the council increases reflecting changes in demographics September 2022	Delivery of extended range of services available.	To be reviewed in 2022	ICT Service Manager with Corporate Communication Manager
	Identify channels which can be closed.	Review of Channels and identify if any can or should be closed April 2023	Provide only those channels needed by customers Over Strategy Period	To be reviewed in 2022 following return to more normal levels of service delivery	ICT Service Manager with Heads of Service

Action Area	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Action Area 3	As part of Organisational Recovery following the COVID 19 Pandemic, all Services to review and if necessary develop systems to allow enhanced home and remote working	Opportunities identified as part of the Business Continuity short term Recovery Actions- September 2021 Projects developed to allow greater flexible working – December 2021 Funding agreed – March 2022	Efficiencies achieved and increases in productivity through roll out of mobile / agile working across council workforce	Business Cases developed Dec 2021	CMT and all Heads of Service
	As part of Organisational Recovery following the COVID 19 Pandemic, Office layouts to reflect greater flexible/remote working	Develop Proposals for CMT consideration – October 2021 Funding considered- March 2022 Project Delivery – From 2022	Better use of Council office estate	Funding approved 2022/23 Budget Adjustments delivered from 2022	Head of Property Services/ ICT Service Manager
	As part of Organisational Recovery, ensure the appropriate policies are in place to support new ways of working	Review Mobile Working and related HR Policies by September 2021	Staff can work safely and securely backed by appropriate policies and support	Hybrid and Home Working policies in draft for consultation. Pilot agreed.	Head of ODHR
Action Area 4	Education Services Digital Strategy	Coordinate with Education Services to ensure provision of Digital Services to schools meets the requirement of modern learning and teaching.	Delivery of extended range of services in schools	Digital Strategy agreed at Education and Communities Committee November 2021	ICT Service Manager with Education Services
	Health & Social Care Partnership Digital Strategy	Over Strategy Period Coordinate with HSCP to ensure provision and delivery of Digital Services to staff, patients and other service users that meet the needs of delivering digital Health and Social Care. Over Strategy Period	Delivery of extended range of services for staff and service users	Complete Draft policy prepared for consultation.	ICT Service Manager with HSCP
Other Digital Strategies					