

**REPORT OF: CENTRAL AND REGENERATION SERVICES
HEAD OF CENTRAL AND REGENERATION SERVICES**

TO: EXECUTIVE

DATES: 19th MARCH 2015

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MATTERS REQUIRING FINANCIAL APPROVAL

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. This regular report summarises issues requiring consideration by the Executive under the Council's Financial and Contract Procedure Rules.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. It is recommended that the Executive:-
 - a) give authority for the Council to act as Accountable Body for the a project to reduce fraud and error on Housing Benefit as set out in the report;
 - b) agree that £40,000 of the revenue funding earmarked for Area Committees in 2015/16 be retained in the General Fund Revenue Budget in lieu of the savings for Play Areas, MUGAs and Passenger Shelters agreed as part of the budget for 2015/16.
 - c) subject to discussion with the Lancashire Constabulary, agree to vary the use of the funding for PCSOs to meet the costs of a dedicated Anti-Social Behaviour Officer to be located in Pendle.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

3. To seek approval from the Executive for various matters that have financial implications for the Council.

ISSUE

FERIS Innovation Bid – Accountable Body Status

4. In November 2014, the Government announced the introduction of the Fraud and Error Incentive Scheme (FERIS). FERIS provides local authorities with incentive-based funding with a view to significantly reducing both fraud and error in the processing of Housing Benefits.
5. The FERIS Scheme comprises three separate funding streams – a start-up fund, FERIS payments arising from a reduction in the weekly entitlement to Housing Benefit and an Innovation Bid Fund totalling £3m. The Council has opted in to the FERIS Scheme and should, therefore, receive both the start-up funding and is likely to obtain additional FERIS payments as planned.
6. In relation to the Innovation Bid Fund, the Council is leading a bid for this funding on behalf of seven other Councils (all of whom are clients of Liberata) along with Liberata and their private sector partner Transactis. The basis of the bid is to extend an existing project - which is looking at fraud and error in Council Tax Reduction Scheme - into Housing Benefit. The project uses data analytics to undertake a risk-based assessment of claims for Housing Benefit which, when considering and comparing various datasets, highlights a high risk of claimant fraud and error. The outcome of this work is a targeted review of claims that should lead to a reduction in fraud and error in Housing Benefit.
7. In the event the Innovation Fund Bid is successful, the Executive is requested to give authority for the Council to be Accountable Body for the funding. Councillors should note that the bid is for £83k grant funding. As Accountable Body, the Council will obtain assurances from partner organisations that any funding will be used in accordance with any conditions for which it is provided thereby limiting the Council's liability for any funding clawback.

Area Committee Revenue Funding

8. As part of the agreed budget for 2015/16, the Council resolved to implement savings of £25,000 and £15,000 respectively for the transfer of Play Areas, MUGAs and Passenger Shelters to Town and Parish Council. These transfers are part of the programme of asset/service transfers that have previously been shared with Town and Parish Councils. Whilst some Town and Parish Councils have expressed an interest in the transfer of these assets/services, at this stage no transfers have taken place.
9. The achievement of the savings is necessary to achieve a balanced budget in 2015/16 (and indeed the ongoing reduction in the budget is factored into the Council's budget plans going forward). Whilst discussions take place with Town and Parish Councils, to mitigate the potential for a shortfall in savings, the Executive is requested to give approval to retain £40,000 of the revenue funding for Area Committees (which currently stands at £70,000) pending the completion of these asset transfers.
10. A further report on the mechanism for releasing the funding once the transfer of the Play Areas, MUGAs and Passenger Shelters begins will be submitted to the Executive in due course.

Funding for PCSOs

11. Councillors will be aware that an amount of £66,000 has been included in General Fund Revenue Budget in 2015/16 for Police Community Support Officers. The present arrangement is that the Council makes a contribution of c£11k towards the cost of each PCSO and is, therefore, contributing towards the cost of 6 (out of the 18 established) PCSO posts.
12. Prior to Christmas, a meeting was held with the Lancashire Constabulary to explore the implications of a reduction in funding by the Council for PCSOs; this was an exploratory discussion as part of the development of budget options for 2015/16. The indications at the time were that, in the event the Council were to withdraw its contribution towards PCSOs, the number of posts would reduce by 2 with each of the remaining PCSOs retained to work on a wider geographical footprint across Pendle. The decision taken at the Budget Council confirmed no change in funding or service.
13. Up until recently, the Council also provided accommodation for a dedicated Anti-Social Behaviour Officer (ASB) who was located in Nelson Town Hall (albeit the post was wholly funded by the Lancashire Constabulary). Towards the end of February 2015, after the Budget Council, the Council was given notice that the ASB Officer would be withdrawn from Nelson, returning to work in Burnley thereby providing less coverage on ASB matters in the Pendle area.
14. The co-location of the ASB Officer with the Council's Community Safety Team in recent years has contributed to a significant improvement in joint-working as well as bringing additional capacity on anti-social behaviour issues. The view of the Community Safety Team is that the change in this arrangement is likely to impact adversely on the Council's ability to pro-actively deal with issues which may ultimately require intervention from the Police.
15. It is recommended, therefore, that subject to further discussions with Lancashire Constabulary, the Executive give authority to vary the use of the funding for PCSOs to meet the costs of the dedicated Anti-Social Behaviour Officer to be co-located in the Council's Offices in Pendle. This will have no additional financial implications for the Council but may result in a reduction in the number of PCSOs funding by the Council (potentially from 6 to 5).

IMPLICATIONS

Policy

16. There are no policy implications arising from the contents of this report.

Financial

17. The financial implications are generally as provided in the report.

Legal

18. There are no legal implications arising directly from the contents of this report.

Risk Management

19. There are no new risk management implication arising from the contents of this report.

Health and Safety:

20. There are no health and safety implications arising from the contents of this report.

Climate Change:

21. There are no climate change implications arising directly from the contents of this report.

Community Safety:

22. There are no community safety issues arising directly from the contents of this report.

Equality and Diversity:

23. There are no equality and diversity issues arising from the contents of this report.

Appendices

None