

REDDITCH BOROUGH COUNCIL

Executive 3rd September 2024

Financial Recovery Plan

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor Ian Woodall, Finance Portfolio Holder
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Debra Goodall
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Wards Affected	N/A
Ward Councillor(s) consulted	N/A
Relevant Strategic Purpose(s)	All
Non-Key Decision	
If you have any questions about this report, please contact the report author in advance of the meeting.	
This report contains exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, as amended	

1. SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to set out the processes the Council has been following to rectify a deterioration in its financial position and processes due to the impact of the implementation of a new financial system in February 2021 during the C-19 pandemic period. This follows on from a report presented on the 14th September 2022 and also the discussions over the S24 Statutory Recommendations that took place in Audit, Governance and Standards Committee, Executive and Council in November and December 2022 and 2023.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive are asked to Resolve that:

- 1) Progress made on the financial recovery be noted including:
 - Delivery of the Statutory Accounts
 - Delivery of Statutory Financial Returns
 - Improvements in the Control Environment
- 2) The work still under way to move back to a best practice operation and the associated timetable for completion of this work, as contained in this Report, be noted.

3. KEY ISSUES

Financial Position

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- 3.1 The Council implemented a new financial system in February 2021. The existing financial system was at the end of its useful life and would not deliver process improvements required to move the Council forward. The implementation has not been smooth and has led to a deterioration of the Council's financial position. This has included:
- Non completion of the 2020/21, and 2021/22 Accounts.
 - Non delivery of monitoring information during the 2021/22 financial year.
 - Non delivery of Government financial returns.
 - Incomplete take-up of the new system by both Finance and Service Users.
 - Loss of key financial staff.
- 3.2 A finance recovery programme was put in place from April 2022 to start to rectify the situation. This was reported through to Executive in September 2022.
- 3.3 These issues build on comments from the External Auditors relating to 2019/20 accounts, which were only approved in the fall of 2021 and the subsequent issuing of the S24 Recommendation on the 31st October 2022 due to non-delivery of the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts. Comments on the 2019/20 accounts highlighted issues on working papers as a significant issue.
- 3.4 The Interim 2021/22 and 2022/23 Auditors Annual Report was received and reviewed by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee on the 23rd November and Council on the 5th December. The report still contains the S24 Recommendation relating to the non-delivery of the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts but is extended to the two subsequent years which are also now due. The Recommendation from Audit Governance and Standards Committee to Council is that:
- the Section 24 Statutory Recommendation be accepted, and that Council review the recommendation, endorse the actions included in the management responses which form the rectification process required as per legislation.
- 3.5 Reflecting the differences between the 2020/21 Interim report and the 2021/22 & 2022/23 Interim Report:
- The Section 24 Recommendation around the delivery of the 2020/21 accounts is still in place and has been extended to the subsequent accounting periods now outstanding.
 - Of the six Key Recommendations in the 2020/21 report, only one serious weakness remains in relation to opening balances linked to the budget which will be resolved with the delivery of the Accounts, the remainder of those significant weaknesses have been resolved or linked to Improvement Recommendations (of which there are 10 in the report).
 - There is one new Key Recommendation linked to Organisational Capability and Capacity. The Council is mitigating this in the main through the rollout of the Workforce Strategy.

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- Of the 13 2020/21 Improvement Recommendations, 9 have been fully or partially addressed and 4 are yet to be addressed. Again, ongoing improvements are linked to the 10 new Improvement Recommendations set out in the External Auditors report.
- 3.6 The External Auditors have noted the significant progress the Council has made in all areas apart from the delivery of the Accounts. As such the existing S24 Statutory Recommendation remains outstanding in relation to the 2020/21 Accounts and they have concluded that it is appropriate for them to use their powers to make written recommendations under section 24 of the Act, with the key reason being the non-delivery of the 2020/21 and subsequent Statutory Accounts.
- 3.7 The Council continue to move forward with the rectification processes and in particular:
- A Peer Challenge did take place in early March, which was a joint review with Redditch, and another report on this agenda sets out actions plans, including a “finance action plan”, to meet the Peer Challenge’s recommendations. The follow up Peer Review sessions took place in December 2023.
 - The root and branch review on how the Council arrived at the Section 24 recommendations carried out by the Task Group of Audit, Standards and Governance Committee at Bromsgrove in February and the recommendations of that report were approved/endorsed by Audit, Governance and Standards Committee in March 2023.
 - That Audit, Governance and Standards Committee continues as a standing agenda item to review progress against the Audit recommendations, and national and local deadlines.

Rectification Process

- 3.8 The Reports presented to Council in December set out the Management Action Plans in place to rectify the issues set out in the S24 Recommendations and the draft 2020/21 External Audit Report. These are also set out in the Peer Review report in Appendix G. This report now concentrates on movements since those formal responses.
- 3.9 Movement since the last finance recovery report in February 2024 has included:
- All Revenue Outturn and Capital Outturn Reports (apart from 2021/22) have been provided to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
 - The 2020/21 Accounts have been submitted and have passed through public inspection. It is still not clear when these accounts will be Audited.
 - The Outturn Report for 2023/24 was provided to Executive in July.
 - Quarters 3 and 4 Finance and Performance Reports for 2023/24 have been presented to Executive.
 - The Quarter 1 2024/5 Finance and Performance Report is on the same Agenda as this report for reviewing by Executive.
 - Since Q2 2023/4, all financial monitoring has been undertaken on TechOne.
 - Monthly Accounts Payable Training continues.
 - Debra Goodall started as the Head of Finance and Customer Services on the 8th April 2024.

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- We appointed 4 staff from the interviews in January – all have now started. We have interviewed for 5 further posts in the summer to bring the team almost up to establishment and reduce the reliance on Agency.
- The Financial Compliance Report, setting out movement in the financial recovery plan, has been reviewed by Audit, Governance and Standards Committee in July, September and November 2023. Audit Governance and Standards Committee continues to meet 6 times a year until all the issues have been rectified, where it will then return to its quarterly cycle.

3.10 In terms of closure work, the following actions have taken place/been agreed with our External Auditors:

- Closure 2020/21
 - Following agreement of opening balance positions the 2020/21 Accounts were opened to Public Inspection following the May Audit, Governance and Standards Committee.
 - Sign off of 20/21 Accounts – to be confirmed with the External Auditors.
- Closure 2021/22
 - Updated Outturn position – still to be provided following the full closure of these accounts.
 - Draft Accounts planned to be presented to the September Audit, Governance and Standards Committee (without any 2020/21 Audit Adjustments).
 - Audit of Accounts following Audit of 2020/21 Accounts.
 - Sign off of the Accounts – to be confirmed with External Auditors.
- Closure 2022/23
 - Draft Provisional Outturn Report – Executive Report delivered on the 12th September 2023. This will be updated following the draft closure of the accounts.
 - Draft Accounts planned to be presented to the September Audit, Governance and Standards Committee (without any 2020/21, 2021/22 Audit Adjustments).
 - Audit of Accounts following Audit of 2020/21 and 2021/22 Accounts.
- Closure 2023/24
 - Draft provisional Outturn Report presented to Executive in July
 - RO/CO Returns have been provided to Government.
 - Draft Accounts planned to be presented to the November Audit, Governance and Standards Committee (without any 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23 Audit Adjustments).
 - Audit of Accounts dependent on changes to legislation given that the Council's External Auditors now change to being Bishop Flemming.
- Value for Money Opinions for 2021/22 and 2022/23. External Auditors delivered their joint Value for Money Opinions in November 2023:
 - S24 Recommendation still in place and extended for 2021/22 and 2022/23 Accounts.

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- 5 of the 6 2020/21 Key Recommendations either delivered or now linked to Improvement Recommendations.
- 9 of 13 2020/21 Improvement Recommendations either Fully or Partially Delivered
- One new Key Recommendation – linked to Workforce Strategy
- Ten updated Improvement Recommendations
- Value For Money Data 2023/24
 - This has been provided to Bishop Flemming in March 2024. Awaiting feedback on timings for reports from the new Government.

3.10 A recovery programme highlighted in the previous report around replacing staff, due to Market shortages is now not such a significant issue given the recent successful recruitment drives.

3.11 Following the General Election in July 2024, the New Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government Jim McMahon OBE MP wrote to Councils on the 30th July. In this letter the minister notes that the significant and unacceptable backlog of unaudited accounts, which will likely rise again to around 1,000 later this year. This situation undermines trust and transparency in the way taxpayers' money is being spent and auditors cannot focus on up-to-date accounts, where assurance is most valuable.

3.12 To tackle the backlog, The Minister intends to lay secondary legislation when parliamentary time allows to provide for an initial backstop date of 13 December 2024 for financial years (FYs) up to and including 2022/23 and five subsequent backstop dates: 2015/16 through to 2019/20 must be signed off by the 30th December 2023.

Financial Year	Backstop date
2023/24	28 February 2025
2024/25	27 February 2026
2025/26	31 January 2027
2026/27	30 November 2027
2027/28	30 November 2028

3.13 Subject to parliamentary approval, for financial years 2024/25 to 2027/28, the date by which local bodies should publish 'draft' (unaudited) accounts will change from 31 May to 30 June following the financial year to which they relate. This will give those preparing accounts more time to ensure they are high-quality accounts. A new suite of guidance is planned by the NAO and Financial Reporting Council (FRC) on these measures, and we continue to work with other organisations to consider what guidance would be most constructive and helpful for local bodies.

3.14 The Minister expects that there will be full assurance, with "clean" opinions for many bodies by the first backstop date of 13 December 2024. However, due to the time constraints, auditors are likely to issue 'disclaimed' audit opinions (no assurance) on

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many accounts – early indications are that this could be several hundred in this first phase which may, in the short term, cause additional concern. I recognise that aspects of these proposals are uncomfortable. Without this action by the Government, audits would continue to be delayed and the system will move even further away from timely assurance.

- 3.15 We are on the 23a version on TechOne and expect to upgrade to 24b in the Autumn. This upgrade has given access to more functionality. However, Redditch and Bromsgrove are still the only Councils on Cash Receipting, when the weekly updates come in they have to do additional checks to ensure the functionality is working as expected.
- 3.16 Progress on the following key financial and compliance indicators are reported monthly to CMT monthly and to both Audit Committees bi-monthly by the S151/Deputy 151 Officers. There is a requirement to report all finance deliverables as per the Recommendations of the Audit Task Group:

Form	Code	Description	Proposed Dispatch	Deadline	Proposed Publication	Position
Capital Payments & Receipts - Q3	CPR3	Cumulative capital expenditure and receipts for Q1, Q2 and Q3 2023-24	15-Dec-23	19-Jan-24	15-Feb-24	Delivered 26/1/24
Non-Domestic Rates Forecast	NNDR1	Billing authority forecasts of the amount of non-domestic rates to be collected in the 2024-25	15-Dec-23	31-Jan-24	21-Feb-24	Delivered 9/2/24 (Civica issue)
Council Tax & NDR Collection - Q3	QRC3	Quarterly return of how much council tax and non-domestic rates are collected in Q3 2023-24	15-Dec-23	12-Jan-24	14-Feb-24	Delivered 15/2/24 (Civica issue)
Quarterly Borrowing & Lending - Q3	QB3	Local authority borrowing and investments from all local authorities to the end of Q3 2023-24	15-Dec-23	08-Jan-24	15-Feb-24	Delivered 17/1/24
Quarterly Revenue Update - Quarters 3 & 4	QRU3	Quarter 1 to 3 2023-24 data and forecast end year local authority revenue expenditure update.	15-Dec-23	26-Jan-24	07-Mar-24	Delivered 19/2/24
Council Tax Requirement/ Parish Council Tax	CTR1/2/3/4	Information on council tax levels set by local authorities in 2024-25 and Council tax levels for 2024-25 set by parishes.	02/02/2024 (tbc)	11-Mar-24	21-Mar-24	Delivered 26/2/24
of which: Parish council tax	-	-	-	11-Mar-24	08-May-24	Delivered 26/2/24

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Revenue Account Budget	RA	Local authority revenue expenditure and financing for 2024-25 Budget	16-Feb-24	05-Apr-24	20-Jun-24	Draft completed. 8/4/24
Capital Estimates Return	CER	Capital forecast for 2024-25	23-Feb-24	22-Mar-24	13-Jun-24	Delivered 22/3/24
Non-Domestic Rates Outturn- unaudited	NNDR3	Collects information from all billing authority on the amount of non-domestic rates collected in 2023-24- provisional data	28-Mar-24	30-Apr-24	10-Jul-24	Draft delivered to Pool 14/4
Non-Domestic Rates Outturn- audited	NNDR3	Collects information from all billing authority on the amount of non-domestic rates collected in 2023-24- final data	n/a	30-Sep-24	15-Nov-24	
Quarterly Borrowing & Lending - Q4	QB4	Local authority borrowing and investments from all local authorities to the end of Q4 2023-24	22-Mar-24	05-Apr-24	13-Jun-24	Delivered 5/4/24
Capital payments & receipts Q4 and provisional outturn	CPR4	Cumulative capital expenditure and receipts for Q1, Q2, Q3, and Q4 2023-24. Expanded collection, used as provisional outturn.	22-Mar-24	19-Apr-24	13-Jun-24	Delivered 29/4/24
Council Tax & NDR Collection - Q4	QRC4	Annual data of levels of council tax and non-domestic rates collected by local authorities in 2023-24 and Q4 2023-24	12-Apr-24	03-May-24	19-Jun-24	Delivered 07/05/24
Capital Outturn Return	COR	Final capital outturn figures for 2023-24	26-Apr-24	26-Jul-24	10-Oct-24	Delivered 29/07/24
Revenue Outturn suite - provisional	RO	Local authority revenue expenditure and financing for 2023-24 Outturn (provisional)	26-Apr-24	28-Jun-24	29-Aug-24	Delivered 19/7/24
Revenue Outturn suite - certified	RO	Local authority revenue expenditure and financing for 2023-24 Outturn (final)	n/a	11-Oct-24	12-Dec-24	
Exit payments	-	Local authority exit payments 2023-24	03-May-24	07-Jun-24	18-Jul-24	Delivered 30/06/2024
Quarterly Borrowing & Lending - Q1	QB1	Local authority borrowing and investments from all local authorities to the end of Q1 2024-25	24-Jun-24	05-Jul-24	08-Aug-24	Delivered 05/07/24
Quarterly Revenue Update - Q1	QRU1	Q1 2024-25 data and forecast end year local authority revenue expenditure update	28-Jun-24	02-Aug-24	12-Sep-24	Delivered 2/08/24

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Capital Payments & Receipts - Q1	CPR1	Cumulative capital expenditure and receipts for Q1 2024-25	21-Jun-24	19-Jul-24	08-Aug-24	Delivered 19/07/24
Council Tax & NDR Collection - Q1	QRC1	Quarterly return of how much council tax and non-domestic rates are collected in Q1 2024-25	21-Jun-24	12-Jul-24	14-Aug-24	Delivered 01/07/24
Local Government Pension Funds	SF3	Collect information on income and expenditure on local government pension schemes for 2023-24	05-Jul-24	13-Sep-24	23-Oct-24	
Council Tax Base/ Supplementary	CTB	Information about the 2024 council tax base for each billing authority.	20-Sep-24	11-Oct-24	06-Nov-24	
Quarterly Borrowing & Lending - Q2	QB2	Local authority borrowing and investments from all local authorities to the end of Q2 2024-25	23-Sep-24	04-Oct-24	14-Nov-24	
Quarterly Revenue Update - Q2	QRU2	Quarter 1 & 2 2024-25 data and forecast end year local authority revenue expenditure update	20-Sep-24	25-Oct-24	05-Dec-24	
Capital Payments & Receipts - Q2	CPR2	Cumulative capital expenditure and receipts for Q1 and Q2 2024-25	20-Sep-24	20-Oct-24	14-Nov-24	
Council Tax & NDR Collection - Q2	QRC2	Quarterly return of how much council tax and non-domestic rates are collected in Q2 2024-25	20-Sep-24	04-Oct-24	20-Nov-24	
Capital Payments & Receipts - Q3	CPR3	Cumulative capital expenditure and receipts for Q1, Q2 and Q3 2024-25	13-Dec-24	17-Jan-25	13-Feb-25	
Non-Domestic Rates Forecast	NNDR1	Billing authority forecasts of the amount of non-domestic rates to be collected in the 2025-26	13-Dec-24	31-Jan-25	19-Feb-25	
Quarterly Revenue Update - Quarters 3 & 4	QRU3	Quarter 1 to 3 2024-25 data and forecast end year local authority revenue expenditure update.	13-Dec-24	24-Jan-25	06-Mar-25	
Quarterly Borrowing & Lending - Q3	QB3	Local authority borrowing and investments from all local authorities to the end of Q3 2024-25	13-Dec-24	06-Jan-25	13-Feb-25	
Council Tax & NDR Collection - Q3	QRC3	Quarterly return of how much council tax and non-domestic rates are collected in Q3 2024-25	13-Dec-24	10-Jan-25	12-Feb-25	

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Council Tax Requirement/ Parish Council Tax	CTR1/2/3/4	Information on council tax levels set by local authorities in 2025-26. Council tax levels for 2025-26 set by parishes	Early Feb 2025	12-Mar-25	20-Mar-25	
of which: Parish council tax	-	-	Early Feb 2025	12-Mar-25	07-May-25	
Revenue Account Budget	RA	Local authority revenue expenditure and financing for 2025-26 Budget	14-Feb-25	04-Apr-25	19-Jun-25	
Capital Estimates Return	CER	Capital forecast for 2025-26	21-Feb-25	21-Mar-25	12-Jun-25	
Monthly Borrowing & Lending	MB	Monthly sample used to provide an estimate of the level of net borrowing by local authorities to go into the ONS/HMT monthly publication Public Sector Finance Statistics	5 working days before 1st working day of the month	Day 5 of each month	for quarter months only, see QB1, QB2, QB3, QB4 dates	Delivered to date
Local Government Finance Statistics	LGFS33	Annual compilation of finance data collected from local authorities covering out-turn data for 2022-23	N/A	N/A	Spring 2024	

In wider sets of deliverables (outside the 2024/5 DLUHC/MHCLG listing) we have the following returns that have been delivered:

- **Budget**
 - Delivered by 11th March in preceding financial year – **2024/5 Budget and MTFP delivered 26th Feb 2024**
 - Council Tax Base – Yearly – **2024/25 delivered on 9th January 2024**
 - Council Tax Resolution – **Yearly 2024/5 delivered on 26th February 2024**
 - Council Tax Billing – Yearly – **Bills distributed in March 2024**
- **Policies**
 - Treasury and Asset Management Strategies
 - **2024/5 Strategy Approved 26th Feb 2024**
 - Half Yearly Report **delivered in Q3 Monitoring Report 18 March 24**
 - Draft Outturn Report **delivered in September 23**
 - Council Tax Support Scheme – **24/5 Approved on 9th January 2024.**
 - Minimum Revenue Provision – yearly – **Approved as part of the 2024/5 MTFP.**
- Financial Monitoring – **delivered quarterly to Executive – Q1 in October, Q2 in November 2023. Q3 In March 2024, Q4 in July.**
- Risk Management – **Delivered quarterly to Audit Committee**
- Savings Report – **Delivered quarterly to Audit Committee**
- Financial Controls (still in development)
 - Clearance of suspense accounts – See the chart at the end of this Report for progress.

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- Bank Reconciliation - ***linked to above point although a separate stream assessing/clearing 2023/4 and prior year items.***
- Over £500 spending.
 - ***Updated to February 2024.***

3.18 The key returns that have still not been delivered are the Revenue Outturn forms for 2021/22 and the VAT returns. Linked to these are the Whole of Government Returns, although it has now been confirmed that no returns will be required for the WOGA for all years up to 2022/23.

3.19 There are a number of areas where compliance will be measured going forwards. Compliance to process and timetable is a key underlying theme of the Draft External Audit Reports 2020/21 through to 2022/23. These items are being measured to improve how we work and change behaviours. This will lead to an improved financial health/knowledge across both Councils. Not all these measures can be put in place instantly but there should be the full suite by the middle of the summer (Debt indicators depend on the clearing of suspense and the updating of the bank reconciliations).

3.20 Training:

- Closure Training took place in March with 83 attending.
- Mandatory Budget Manager Training (including the use of TechOne) took place in September 2023 – upskilling budget managers with the tools to input their forecasts directly onto TechOne.
- Mandatory Financial Awareness Training for managers took place in August and September.
- Payments Purchase Order Training takes place monthly.

3.21 Treasury Management

- The Half Yearly 2023/4 Treasury Management Report was presented to Executive on the 18th March.
- The 2024/5 Strategies were approved by Council in February.

3.22 Audit VFM Report Requirements

- More Budget Consultation.
- Wider savings monitoring will be undertaken by this Committee quarterly.
- Capital and its deliverability will be reviewed as part of the Budget Tranche 2.
- Benchmarking is now incorporated into the budget process (using LG Futures data).
- The Internal Audit Service will be externally assessed in early 2024.
- The Council will seek an independent Audit Committee member and ensure the Committee remains apolitical in nature.
- The whistleblowing policy will be updated before the end of the financial year.
- Procurement and contract rules will be updated by the end of the financial year (to reflect changes to legislation happening in April 2024).

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- Performance Indicators will be reviewed and updated following Strategic Priority setting sessions.

The Council is still to run sessions to assess its “risk appetite”.

3.23 Errors:

- Non delivery of GPC Card Data (monthly basis) – still to be started.
- Mis-coding on TechOne per month – by Service Area – work is ongoing to clear the mis-codings on a monthly basis in conjunction with work going on to reconcile previous years.

3.24 Process Updates

- Finance time to respond to queries:
 - Finance – to be measured.
 - Payments and Insurance – to be measured.
 - Income – to be measured.
- Procurement
 - The new ‘No Compliance No Order’ process has been live since April 2023.
 - The number of contracts in place is growing regularly. We hope that eventually we get to the place where the number of orders coming to procurement for approval as contracts are not in place are minimal.
 - Council in July approved an increase of the Key Decision Level from £50k to £200k. Finance and Performance Monitoring Reports now set out:
 - All contracts requiring renewal over the next year that are over the present £200k threshold and these are placed on the forward plan.
 - All contracts requiring renewal over the next year that are between £50k and £200k for reference.
 - All contracts that are being procured by Bromsgrove over this period that relate to Redditch Services.

3.26 Work is ongoing on the clearance of the Cash Receipting suspense accounts. The Council now has processes in place for the different types of error that have taken place since the implementation of the TechOne system. Corrections will be actioned by journal although conversations are taking place with TechOne to ensure as much as possible can be automated. As reported earlier in this report, this will ensure the delivery of accounts from 2021/2 to 2023/4 to the timescales set out. One of the processes is the clearance of Treasury transactions which by their nature are a manual process but of significant size.

4. Legal Implications

4.1 No Legal implications have been identified.

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5. Strategic Purpose Implications

Relevant Strategic Purpose

- 5.1 The Strategic purposes are included in the Council's corporate plan and guides the Council's approach to budget making ensuring we focus on the issues and what are most important for the borough and our communities. Our Financial monitoring and strategies are integrated within all of our Strategic Purposes.

Climate Change Implications

- 5.2 The green thread runs through the Council plan. Every report has potential financial implications and these in term can have implications on climate change. These will be addressed and reviewed through individual reports when relevant by climate change officers will ensure the correct procedures have been followed to ensure any impacts on climate change are fully understood.

6. Other Implications

Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 6.1 None as a direct result of this report.

Operational Implications

- 6.2 Managers meet with finance officers to consider the current financial position and to ensure actions are in place to mitigate any overspends.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 The financial monitoring is included in the corporate risk register for the authority

8. APPENDENCES

None

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