Inverclyde council

Report To:	**Policy & Resources Committee**	**Date:**	**22 March 2022**
Report By:	**Interim Director, Finance & Corporate Governance**	**Report No:**	**FIN/22/22/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 update the Committee on various matters being progressed by the Finance Service.

2.0 SUMMARY

2.1 The level of applications to the Self Isolation Support Grant (SISG) delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government remains high with 20 applications being made on average every day. 930 applications were received during the first 7 weeks of 2022 which compares with 141 during the same period last year.

2.2 Two "cost of living awards" are being progressed by the service. The first for £150 relates to the Scottish Government scheme with support to be paid out by the end of April. The second which has the same Council Tax Reduction and Council Tax exempt eligibility criteria as the Scottish Government scheme (plus the addition of student households) is the Council's own scheme which has a £350 award. A slightly longer delivery timescale has been approved but this is hoped to allow the majority of payments to be made directly to bank accounts.

2.3 Section 6 provides an update on the ICT and Digital strategies and reports good initial take up for the 2022 Garden Waste permit scheme. The ICT Service Desk have amended their operating hours to facilitate the Hybrid Working pilot which is scheduled to run for 12 months.

2.4 The initial Audit Planning meeting took place with Audit Scotland on 1 March where priorities and scope for this years audit were discussed. This is the last year of Audit Scotland's appointment and it is hoped that the experience accumulated over the last 4 years will assist officers and auditors achieve a smooth audit.

2.5 Following approval of the 2022/23 Budget the Accountancy team are working on finalising the Revenue and Capital Budgets which will begin to be reported to the new Council after the summer recess.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 It is recommended that the Committee note the continued good performance of the Revenues & Benefits plus ICT teams despite the extra workload taken on by both teams as a result of the response to Covid.

3.2 It is recommended that the Committee otherwise note the report.

Alan Puckrin
Interim Director, 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.

4.3 The audit of the 2020/21 Accounts identified a number of matters which required to be addressed as part of the 2021/22 Accounts closure whilst the 2022/23 Budget was approved by Council on 24 February, 2022.

5.0 REVENUES & BENEFITS

5.1 **Self Isolation Support Grant**
The level of applications to the Self Isolation Support Grant (SISG) delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government remains high with 20 applications being made on average every day. 930 applications were received during the first 7 weeks of 2022 which compares with 141 during the same period last year. An online application form was launched at pace at the end of January in response to the increased demand which has aided access to the grant. Despite the high volume of applications and delays obtaining supporting information and evidence from applicants, more than 90% of applications are routinely processed within 2 weeks of the date of application. The team continues to be supported by colleagues from other Council services.

5.2 **Cost of Living Awards**
Scottish Ministers announced a Cost of Living Award of £150 which COSLA and Scottish Ministers agreed local authorities would administer for eligible households. Eligibility is based on whether the person is liable for Council Tax on 14 February, 2022 for a dwelling that they live in, and, is either in receipt of a Council Tax Reduction for that dwelling or that dwelling is in Council Tax valuation Bands A-D. In certain circumstances, persons living in dwellings exempt from Council Tax will be eligible. Approximately 30,000 households could be eligible for the award in Inverclyde.

5.3 The Scottish Government's overriding objective is for the award to be made to eligible households before the end of April 2022. The Council's administrative systems can facilitate payments made as a credit to the Council Tax account of eligible persons so in line with the majority of councils, the award will be paid to 2022/23 Council Tax accounts. The result will be a reduction in monthly instalments or for those whose accounts are placed into credit, a refund can be requested by contacting the service or through the Customer Service Centre. An insert will be included in Council Tax bills explaining arrangements.

5.4 Inverclyde Council agreed on 24th February as part of the 2022/23 council budget additional support of £3m to low income households to help tackle the cost of living crisis. This was increased by a further £500,000 at the Policy & Resources Executive Sub-Committee on 10 March. A one-off payment of £350 will be made to all households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction and most households exempt from paying Council Tax. The Council Tax exempt households are the same groups as those who qualify for the Scottish Government Cost of Living Award plus dwellings where all occupants are students. Eligibility for the award is based on whether the person was liable for Council Tax on 24 February.

5.5 Eligible householders will be asked to provide bank details for the payment to be made or where details were provided for other Covid related payments in the last year, a letter will be sent advising the intention to credit the same account with the aim of making payments no later than early June with the first payments scheduled for late April.

5.6 The £100 Winter Hardship Support Payment agreed by the Council on 2nd December 2021 was completed in January with 490 households receiving their payment directly to their bank account. 174 others did not respond to the offer however a credit was made to their Council Tax account, reducing their liability. Any resulting credit in Council Tax accounts will be refunded on request.

5.7 **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 is projected to be £210,000. Adjustments to the DHP policy were agreed by Committee in February 2022 reducing the excess income threshold to ensure 2022/23 expenditure is contained within budget, expected to be £160,000. Expenditure against the Social Sector Size criteria is projected as £1.19m and is funded by the Scottish Government

5.8 **Scottish Welfare Fund**
The Scottish Welfare Fund core allocation of £756,000 is supplemented by £168,000 carried forward from a Covid-19 allocation received during 2020/21 and an additional allocation of £150,000 Winter Hardship Support, approved by the December Council. Expenditure to 31st January 2022 was £897,000 of which £673,000 was paid as Community Care Grants and £224,000 as Crisis Grants. The Winter Hardship Support allocation ensures there is sufficient budget to fund approved grants until March 2022.

5.9 Scottish Government funding for Scottish Welfare Fund is frozen for 2022/23. Expenditure will be closely monitored 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. The allocation of Winter Support Funding has allowed Crisis Grants to be increased by a further 20% above the established 20% increase on the Scottish Government recommended grant level for the remainder of 2021/22. In addition, at the 10 March Policy & Resources Sub-Committee £60,000 was agreed from the Anti-Poverty Fund to maintain this level of award for 2022/23.

5.10 **Tenants Grant Fund**
The Scottish Government funded Covid-19 Tenant Grant Fund launched during November 2021. The fund is to assist tenants who have incurred rent arrears as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic who are at risk of homelessness. The fund has been promoted directly with registered private rented sector and social sector landlords and by the end of February 2022, £17,000 of Inverclyde's £93,000 share of funding had been paid in respect of 13 tenants, all in the social housing sector. A number of applications made by private rented sector landlords have not been progressed because the landlords cannot comply the Scottish Government's rigorous arrears management requirements. A progress report will be provided to the Scottish Government in March.

6.0 ICT UPDATE

6.1 The ICT and Digital Strategies develop and build on the work of the previous strategies and aim to increase and promote the range of digital services available to employees and customers and to exploit the opportunities digital services can achieve by:
• Improving user experience and interaction with Council Services
• Reducing cost to deliver services via channel shift opportunities
• Improving efficiencies and productivity of services
A core requirements was the implementation of Cloud Based tools including migration to Microsoft 365**.** Appendix 1 provides an update on both the Digital and ICT Strategies.

6.2 Procurement of the Cloud Based tools through the Scottish Government Framework has been completed. Initial "on boarding" to the Microsoft Cloud Platform has been completed. ICT are working with the supplier and Microsoft to implement suitable security and functionality profiles. The first users from the pilot programme within ICT have been enrolled and have accessibility to the full range of Cloud tools including MS Teams. Further work to migrate email to the cloud, and then a full roll out to the wider estate is progressing. A project timeline and roll-out programme has been developed. A number of project sub-groups are being

established to work with Services to communicate the programme.

6.3 There is a continued increase in the number of contacts and payments being completed by e-form. The use of the online service for the vast majority of Garden Waste Permit payments indicates the ability of the majority of customers to use the e-form model. The new "season" for payments has seen an increase in the number of payments compared to the same period last year (4000 v 3500 as at late February). There has also been a year on year increase of 219 in the number of households receiving an online Council Tax bill with 1287 using the facility for the 2022/23 Annual Billing run. Customer Services will move back under the remit of Finance Services from April 2022 reporting to ICT Service Manager to enhance and develop digital and other channels of customer interaction.

6.4 The Service Desk continues to deliver a high quality service however, there remains a challenge to ensure that this is maintained in light of on-going and increasing resource pressures as a result of COVID-19 Pandemic and recovery. From 28 February the Service Desk hours were amended to facilitate the expanded working envelope for "office based" employees as part of the hybrid working pilot. The Service Desk now opens at 8.00 each morning and by the end of March will be open until 18.00.

7.0 ACCOUNTANCY

7.1 The audit of the 2020/21 Accounts identified a number of matters which required to be addressed as part of the 2021/22 Accounts closure. Accountancy have created a group which is meeting fortnightly to progress matters and delivery of these actions is being monitored by the Audit Committee.

7.2 The initial Audit Planning meeting took place with Audit Scotland on 1 March where priorities and scope of this years audit were discussed. This is the last year of Audit Scotland's appointment and it is hoped that the experience accumulated over the last 4 years will assist officers and auditors achieve a smooth audit. The deadline for the approval of the accounts by the Council has been advanced one month to the 31 October albeit this remains one month later than pre-Covid timescales.

7.3 Following approval of the 2022/23 Budget the Accountancy team are working on finalising the Revenue and Capital Budgets which will begin to be reported to the new Council after the summer recess.

8.0 IMPLICATIONS

8.1 **Finance**

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)

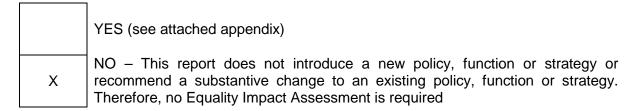| Cost Centre	Budget Heading	With Effect from	Annual Net Impact	Virement From (If Applicable)	Other Comments
N/A					

8.2 **Legal**

There are no legal issues arising.

8.3 **Human Resources**

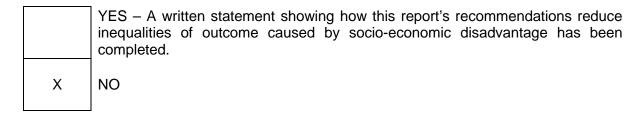There are no HR implications arising from this report.

8.4 **Equalities**

Equalities

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

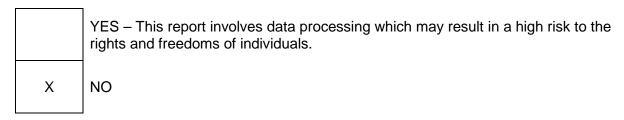|	
	YES (see attached appendix)
X	NO – This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a substantive change to an existing policy, function or strategy. Therefore, no Equality Impact Assessment is required

(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

8.5 **Repopulation**

There are no repopulation implications arising from this report.

9.0 CONSULTATIONS

9.1 None

10.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None

APPENDIX 1

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 - Complete	Sustainable refresh programme embedded	Budget uplift agreed as part of 2022/23 Budget setting process. **COMPLETE**	Chief Financial Officer/ICT Service Manager
		Staff have the appropriate equipment to work effectively and efficiently from the most appropriate location From 2023	Staff satisfaction surveys reflect confidence in IT Services. Line Managers are satisfied that staff have appropriate equipment	Standard specification for equipment agreed by CMT. Hybrid working options being identified by New Ways of Working Group	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 - Complete 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 Complete August 2022	Cloud services including MS Teams deployed to staff	Contract Awarded August 2021. Project timeline developed and agreed First roll-out complete in ICT Server Team	ICT Service Manager
	Cloud Migration Strategy	Agree approach to deliver Telephony and other Communications Systems in the Cloud March 2022	Contracts awarded for new Telephony approach	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. Ongoing through life of Strategy	Customer satisfaction with service provided	SLA Statistics reported to P&R COMPLETE	ICT Service Manager
	Core Systems	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 EDRMS. March 2022	Services have access to the tools and functions required to provide effective efficient services to customers and staff.	Report to CMT February 2022 on medium term plans for Core Systems Initial report presented, further exploratory work underway.	ICT Service Manager

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

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 Ongoing	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 **Fully Adopted**	ICT Service Manager
	Account Management	Meet with suppliers to review and ensure best value and most efficient levels of delivery and support of systems Ongoing	Appropriate level of supplier support and best value delivery	Supplier meetings ongoing **Fully Adopted**	ICT Service Manager
	Project Management	Use temporary increase in Project Management resources to deliver support to services in planning and deploying projects and services 2021/23	Business Cases are developed and projects are delivered on time and on budget	Candidate appointed August 2021 **Complete**	ICT Service Manager

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 Complete - 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 digitised 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 3	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Mobile & Agile Working	As part of New Ways of Working Project 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 Forms part of New Ways of Working Project.	CMT and all Heads of Service
	As part of New Ways of Working Project 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 New Ways of Working Project, 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 issued. COMPLETE	Head of ODHR

Action Area 4	Action	Milestones	Success Criteria	Update	Responsibility
Other Digital Strategies	Education Services Digital Strategy	Coordinate with Education Services to ensure provision of Digital Services to schools meets the requirement of modern learning and teaching. Over Strategy Period	Delivery of extended range of services in schools	Digital Strategy agreed at Education and Communities Committee November 2021 COMPLETE	ICT Service Manager with Education Services
	Health & Social Care Partnership Digital Strategy	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	Draft policy prepared for consultation.	ICT Service Manager with HSCP