



Finance (and Information Technology) Department



The Finance Department's intention is to contribute towards achieving the aim of attempting "the best for the people of Gwynedd during a difficult period" by:

- ensuring the appropriate support to the Council's business operation and its services when managing, safeguarding and developing its financial position, in order to establish a sustainable community in an open, accountable and prominent manner
- ensuring professional supportive guidance and technology of a high standard that promotes the Council's basic values and encourages entrepreneurship
- providing front line services (such as collecting revenue and paying benefits) of a suitable quality to the customer, providing fairness to people and communities, and focusing on residents.

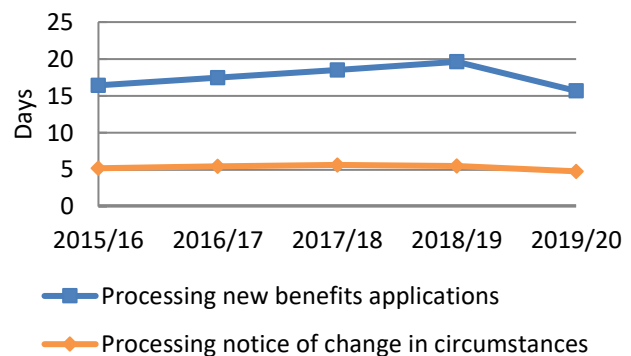
Together with the day to day work outlined below, this Department leads on the following priority project:

- The transfer of holiday units from Council Tax to Business Rates (Improvement Priority 4)

Benefits Service

The Council administrates benefit support to approximately 7,500 tenants to pay their rents, and to approximately 10,000 individuals, couples or families to pay their Council Tax bill, aiming to do this in a timely and accurate manner.

It can be seen from the graph that the number of days it takes us to pay has reduced in 2019/20, after a few years of gradual increase. This comes as a result of ongoing efforts to review work arrangements.

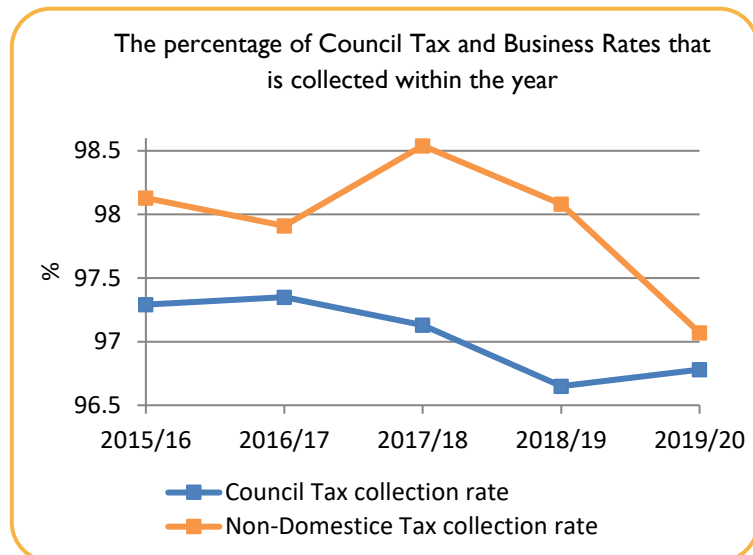


2021/22 will be a key year as the UK Government holds a comprehensive review of financial arrangements. We will lobby the Government that the level of demand for service from the Council will continue for longer than predicted. Although the local authorities have lost the subsidy grant, it funded support to personal budgets and digital support, it is expected for enquiries from the public to continue.

On the whole, arrangements are going smoothly and therefore the likelihood of substantial decline in the service provided by the Council is now relatively low. We have also lobbied the Government, and we have managed to convince them again to conduct the rural element of the Discretionary Housing Payments, which will make a significant difference to the people of Gwynedd in 2021/22.

Taxation Service

Without Council Tax and Business Rates, the Council would not be able to provide its services. This service administrates and collects Council Tax for over 61,500 properties, and Business Rates (Non-domestic Rates) of approximately 8,000 business properties in the most timely and efficient manner as possible, including administrating the various available discounts, exemptions and release schemes.



After a few years of marginal reductions in the rates of Council Tax collection, the rate remained relatively consistent in 2019/20.

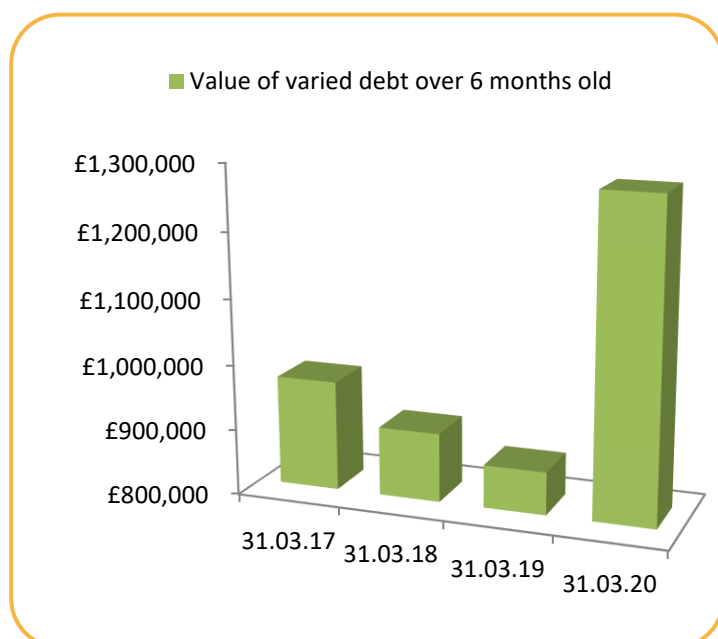
We fully understand that it is not easy for everyone to pay these taxes, and in the context of the restrictions of the pandemic, the collection rate will reduce again in 2020/21. After suspending recovery arrangements for 3 months from March to June 2020, the Taxation service is flexible (e.g. payment arrangements and agreements being encouraged) and sympathetic to the circumstances of individuals. The Council's Taxation staff seeks to encourage individuals to request advice on personal budgeting and broader debt advice.

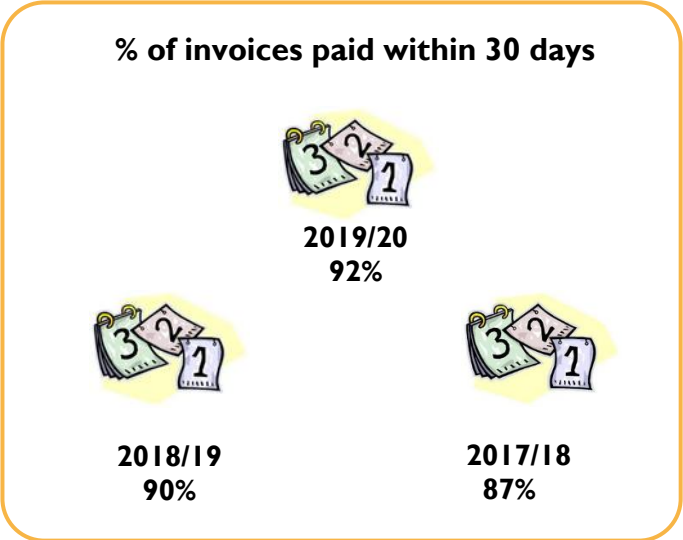
The transfer of holiday units from the Council Tax system to non-domestic rates remains a financial risk. In 2021/22, we will aim to meet with the Minister in order to place pressure on the Government to change the legislation relating to holiday homes and holiday units, and we will hold a broader campaign to promote suitable legislation.

Income Service

The Council receives income (e.g. grants, payments for service) of all types, and the Income Service processes this income, collecting the Council's debts in a timely and efficient manner in order to make the most of the income. The service considers the needs of the Council's departments and acts sensitively to debtors' financial circumstances when carrying out its work.

The debtors figure over 6 months old on 31 March 2020 was higher than the equivalent date in previous years, partly due to the restrictions of the pandemic.





Payments Service

The service is responsible for paying the Council's creditors in an accurate and timely manner. We pay over 105,000 invoices annually, with 92% of the invoices being paid within 30 days on average, aiming to prioritise paying local suppliers promptly.

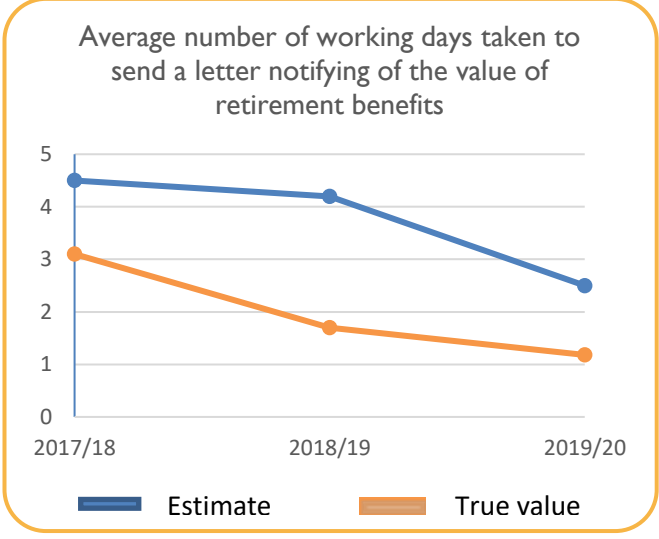
The service has now moved to a procedure of receiving invoices electronically, with over 95% of our payments now being bank transfers, rather than cheque payments.

Payroll Service

There are over 7,200 different individuals working for the Council in order to enable it to serve on behalf of the people of Gwynedd, and the purpose of the Payroll Service is to ensure that they get paid accurately and in a timely manner. The service also keeps appropriate accounts in order to pay external bodies such as HMRC.

Pensions Service

The Pensions Service is responsible for administrating the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) on behalf of over 40 employers including Gwynedd Council, Anglesey County Council and Conwy County Borough Council. The fund has over 18,000 active members, 12,000 deferred members and 10,000 pensioners. The service's daily duties include establishing a record for new members, making changes to members' records, calculating deferred benefits, transferring pension rights in and out of the LGPS, and paying benefits after the retirement and death of the scheme's members.



During 2021/22, the Pensions Service will focus on improving the correspondence and self-service provision for members. Also, it is intended to work with the employers of the Pension Fund to receive relevant details for re-calculating member benefits following the 'McCloud' case.

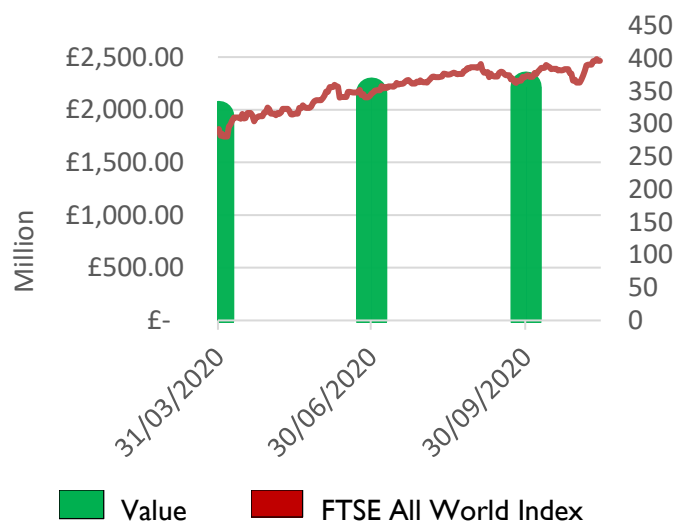
Investment and Treasury Management Service

This service invests the Council's money in order to gain interest, to contribute to the funding of the services. They also manage the investments of the Pension Fund, to ensure their ability to pay pensions now and in the future. In addition to this, the service plans and arranges long-term borrowing.

The Unit's aim is to keep money safe, gain interest and ensure that funding is available to pay for daily expenditure.

During 2020/21, the Council's borrowing activity remained within the constraints originally set. £546,000 was the total interest and dividends received on investments, which is higher than the £406,000 included in the budget. No banks the Council had used for investments had failed to pay.

Local government pension schemes in Wales increasingly co-invest in order to gain the best return for pension scheme members. The Gwynedd Fund has pooled the equity and income investments with developing markets to come in the summer of 2021. 2020/21 was a challenging year following the slump in the stock markets in March 2020 caused by the pandemic, but the markets have bounced back with a recovery in the value of the Pension Fund of £2.2 billion by 30 September 2020.



Finance and Accounting Service (including devolved units)

We provide a finance and accounting service for the Council's services, and help and support them to be effective and efficient. The service:

- Sets an annual balanced budget for the Council
- Regularly monitors and reports on the Council's financial performance
- Provides financial support with a gross budget of over £431 million
- Is responsible for producing final accounts for Gwynedd Council, GwE, Joint Planning Policy Committee, Harbours and North Wales Economic Ambition Board
- Assists the departments to realise over £30 million of savings since 2015 (out of a total of £36 million).



Success in staying within the budget

The Auditor General for Wales has published an unconditional audit report on the 2019/20 financial statements, namely that the accounts had been appropriately prepared and provide an accurate and fair picture of the financial situation.

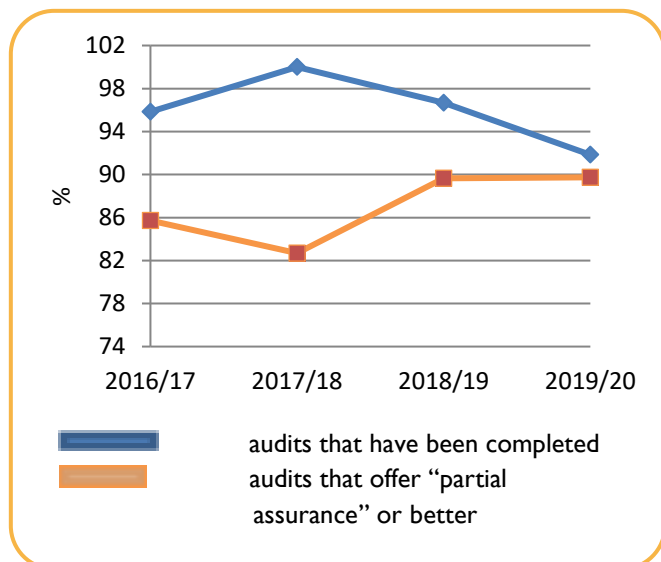
As a result of the pandemic's impact on the Council, with a combination of additional costs and income losses to the value of over £13 million by the end of November 2020, we will provide additional financial advice to all Council budget holders, as well as "business" advice to the departments.

In general, the money the Council receives from Welsh Government is insufficient to pay for the key services provided by the Council. Therefore, in order to ensure a balanced budget, we will also continue to realise the savings that have already been approved, and will also ensure that we plan to identify and select the savings required in order to respond to the financial challenge facing the Council in the future.

Internal Audit Service

The service reviews the Council's governance and administrative arrangements in order to give confidence to the authority and the citizen that these arrangements are robust. We report independently and objectively to the Head of Finance Department and the Audit and Governance Committee, and to the joint-committees where Gwynedd acts as the host authority.

In March 2020, Internal Audit resources had to be redirected temporarily to deal with the Covid-19 emergency, therefore, not every audit was completed in accordance with the expected timetable.



Risk and Insurance Service

All Council departments need to assess the threats and opportunities that could face them when providing their services, and prioritise their activities based on the assessment. The role of the Risk and Insurance Service is to advise and support the departments in doing so. The Service also protects the interests of ratepayers, by ensuring appropriate insurance arrangements and dealing with around 250 claims per year.

Work continues to ensure that all Council departments record their main risks and are regularly reviewed. The Risk and Insurance Service will support all departments to ensure that the use made of the Corporate Risk Register is consistent across the Council, and that risks are updated continuously. In parallel, there will be increasing consideration of the content of risk registers when monitoring departmental performance.

Information Technology Service

The Council's Information Technology Strategy is implemented in order to help the people of Gwynedd to gain easy access to the Council's information and services, and for staff to work efficiently.

The face of this service is the *Support Service and the Help Desk* which supports 2,550 users and meets approximately 20,000 service requests per annum. 2020/21 has been very challenging, with 600 laptops provided during the first half of the year - a 33% increase on the normal total being provided in a whole year.

Significant changes had been programmed before the advent of the pandemic, and changes such as VPN, Microsoft Teams and Office 365 connections have been significant in the IT Service's efforts to maintain Council services.

% of network availability

2019/20: 99.98%

2020/21: 99.98%



% bodlonrwydd y Ddesg
Gymorth

2019/20: 99.35%

2020/21: 99.22%



The *Infrastructure, Security and Network Unit* ensures that technology services are introduced on firm foundations, extending to 300 buildings, 1,400 WiFi access points and 2,700 telephone connections and supports all systems in the data centre, on 440 servers and over 1,000TB of storage. The two data centres are connected with a fast fibre connection and a recent investment in a generator in the headquarters means that we will see further improvements to the resilience of the Council's infrastructure.

With up to 2,450 officers working from home, substantial changes needed to be made at the beginning of the year to enable the provision, thus doubling the link to the internet, building two new firewalls, and providing specialist equipment to enable the Galw Gwynedd contact centres, IT Help Desk, and Council Tax frontline to serve in full from the homes of the individual staff members.

The *Development and Geographical Information Service Unit* provides systems that have been developed around the bespoke needs of the user, including systems that are being used by the departments to serve the public, direct interfaces for the public, and self-service for staff. Substantial progress was made on introducing new systems during 2020/21, including the provision of a number of emergency systems in response to the pandemic, including provision to book Siop Gwynedd and recycling centre appointments, a test, trace, protect system for north Wales local authorities and the Health Board, along with various claiming and processing systems for various grants for the county's businesses.

The *Programme Management and Innovation Unit* provides support for the departments to meet their IT needs, including ordering IT equipment and materials, implementing and monitoring agreements and analysing needs.

The Gwynedd Schools Digital Strategy was prepared, with the technical provision now in progress and we will introduce a new Corporate Digital Strategy in 2021/22, thus transforming the Council's services further.

During 2020/21, the Information Technology Service will carry out other exercises to strengthen the resilience of the Council's provision, introduce substantial improvements within our schools and put the new Digital Strategy into practice.