

Full Council Meeting – 29 September 2020

Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources

This report is split into the areas sitting under the Internal Operations directorate i.e. Customer, Finance and Corporate. The matters to update Members on, are as follows:

All areas under Internal Operations continue to provide ongoing support for the Coronavirus response, but is also starting to pick up the reins again on business as usual activities and objectives.

Customer

Business Grants

The Revenues and Operational Support teams have continued to be heavily involved in the processing of business grants throughout the summer. The application window for both the Government and our local discretionary schemes has now closed and we are in the process of dealing with the final few cases. To date we have paid out £43.9m to 3,800 businesses.

Benefits

We continue to process new applications and changes of circumstance for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support. We have seen an increase in the Council Tax Support caseload from 11,000 to approx. 11,500, which is linked to the economic impact of the Coronavirus crisis.

We have recently recommenced work on delivering the process changes identified in the Benefits Lean Review exercise. This will include implementing a 'there and then' approach to processing new claims and changes, although we now want to trial this approach over the telephone as opposed to face-to-face. This reflects learning from the past 4 months where we have had to find new ways of dealing with customers.

We are also working with our software supplier to further automate the processing of change notifications from the DWP. These make up a significant proportion of the work and automating could release resourcing to focus on other essential benefits work.

Revenues

The Revenues Team have been heavily involved in the administration of the Governments Small Business, Retail, Hospitality & Leisure and elements of our Local Discretionary Business Grant schemes.

The focussing of resourcing on the business grant schemes had resulted in the build-up of a backlog of council tax and business rates work. The team have now cleared this backlog and are processing changes, on average, within 15 working days. The processing of valuation lists is up to date.

We have recommenced a limited property inspection service and are risk assessing visits before they are being made.

We are working closely with Sedgemoor on the development of in-house Revenues software.

Business Intelligence (BI)

The BI team have continued to provide ongoing data support for Coronavirus response activities such as the business grants and work with vulnerable customers.

In addition ongoing progress is being made to get our basic governance processes (e.g. corporate performance monitoring and reporting, risk management, monitoring of audit actions) back on track. A regular corporate performance monitoring regime has now been introduced providing for monthly reviews by the Senior Management Team and quarterly reports to Members. This is underpinned by a new Performance Management Framework.

The team are also currently working closely with Property Services to clear a backlog of work relating to our Property Terrier.

Corporate Strategy

The team has been heavily involved in supporting the administration of the various business grant schemes. This has included developing an addendum to the Business Rates Discretionary Rate Relief Policy, which was agreed by Members on 25 August 2020.

The team are now focussing on developing and progressing the Customer Access & Experience Programme. The initial phases of this involve data collection to inform the shape of future service delivery. This will include a customer satisfaction survey, the analysis of complaints and the use of mosaic data.

Customer Services & Deane Helpline

The Deane Helpline has continued to provide the full service for customers. During this period we have dealt with 45,000 calls to the Deane Helpline, with an average abandonment rate of only 1% and 95% of calls being answered within 60 seconds. We have successfully introduced a new self-service option for installing equipment for new customers, which allows us to install equipment in a socially distanced way and is also more efficient.

We have reopened the Deane House Customer Hub on an appointments only basis. This has gone very smoothly. The Customer Champions have triaged all requests and in most cases have been able to resolve the customer's issue over the phone. Where a face to face meeting is the only way to provide a solution an appointment has been made, this has been very rare.

The Taunton Visitor Centre also reopened, initially just for refunds for cancelled concerts and events but now also to the general public to support our reopened High Street. Safety and careful control of how we interact with our customers

has of course been a top priority so we have worked closely with Kate Lusty to achieve this.

We have recently recruited 3 new customer champions to fill vacancies within the team and are working with the People Managers to develop and deliver effective induction training.

Performance in August has been challenging primarily due to staff shortages (hence the recruitment) and ongoing problems with the Somerset Waste Partnership around collections and deliveries of new and replacement bins.

The Somerset Coronavirus Support Helpline has been relatively quiet with only around 15-25 calls per day on weekdays and only 3-6 on Saturdays and Sundays. Calls to this service are routed to staff already on duty in our virtual call centre or during out of hours periods, to Deane Helpline. This therefore does not have a negative impact on our resources and can be continued until the Coronavirus situation has cleared.

	Calls	Abandoned	Average Wait Time
April	13,537	3%	32 seconds
May	14,348	9%	1 minute 3 Seconds
June	18,899	12%	1 minute 51 seconds
July	17,999	12%	1 minute 50 seconds
August*	13,666	13%	1 minute 59 seconds

*Up to 25/8/20

We have had to temporarily suspend the Customer Satisfaction Survey due to necessary changes needed to the IVR Call Queue to enable the Somerset Coronavirus Support Helpline to work correctly, we will put it back into operation as soon as practical.

We have suspended the Customer Outreach Project for the duration of the current Coronavirus Pandemic and instructions on Social Distancing, we will restart this shortly and incorporate the lessons we've learned throughout Lockdown to target rural locations through appointments rather than as drop in sessions.

Income

The processing of daily Direct Debit income runs and outgoing payment processes has continued without significant problems despite the lockdown restrictions. To date there has not been any significant reduction in the numbers of customers paying by Direct Debit. These processes are vital for maintaining our essential income streams (rent, business rates, council tax etc.) and for paying suppliers.

We are continuing to actively encourage customers to move away from making payments by cheque, as processing cheques is more costly and requires us to bring staff into Deane House.

We are also starting to recommence formal action to recover unpaid council tax, business rates and sundry debts. However, we are taking a gentle approach to switching back on the recovery processes and reviewing the impact as we go. The focus is very much on encouraging contact from customers who are experiencing financial difficulties so that we can provide help and support. To enable this we are limiting the numbers of notifications issued on any one day.

The team is also responsible for administering the 'right to buy' function for Housing and this has now successfully recommenced.

We are in the process of testing and implementing new BACS payment and Direct Debit software.

Operational Support

The Operational Support has been heavily involved in the administration of our Local Discretionary Business Grants scheme.

During this time the team has also continued to process supplier invoices quickly to ensure that we are getting payments out to business promptly. We averaged 97% of invoices being paid within 30 days for the first 4 months of the financial year.

The team have also maintained the processing and scanning of incoming post throughout the lockdown period, which has necessitated bringing staff into Deane House.

Programme Management Office (PMO)

Work has continued to implement robust, standardised and consistent mechanisms for the managing and monitoring of our key programmes and projects.

We are in the process of implementing a new reporting and monitoring framework to ensure regular progress monitoring at all levels within the organisation. This will, in due course, provide for quarterly reporting to Members and will link to the delivery of the Corporate Strategy objectives.

Corporate

People

Communications

- Providing guidance on employer expectation. This has evolved since lockdown easing and education settings being re-opened
- Information on support and wellbeing services
- Interpreting Government Guidance and communicating to staff
- Guidance for employees on travel abroad
- Working with colleagues in other Districts to ensure consistency

COVID 19 Response – ongoing

- Collation and on-going staff tracking

- COVID 19 testing
- Dealing with vulnerability and health conditions
- Supporting dependent responsibilities
- Redeployment into essential services

Culture

- New Performance Management approach is under development
- Transition to 'People Business Partners' and Directorate working and new proposition is underway which has included coaching training for People Managers
- 'People Culture' documents and People Policies have been created. Commenced rollout with SMT and UNISON for feedback.
- A Neurodiversity project has been established which looks into greater inclusion in our recruitment and working practices
- Neonatal leave and pay incorporated into the Maternity Policy
- Pay Policy Statement completed and approved

Data Development

- HR data continues to progress – provision of Directorate dashboards including data on casework, sickness, leave, recruitment, starters and leavers, health & safety, well-being
- Reviewing staffing in terms of agency and contractors work continues
- Pay award communicated to employees and agencies and implementing changes with pay backdated to 1 April

Health & Wellbeing

- Working remotely survey has been completed with some positive results around staff preferences for homeworking. Results are being analysed with action planning underway
- Weekly Wellbeing bulletin and CareFirst bulletin have been sent out to staff as a reminder of support available
- Staff Facebook Page has been set up with message from the SWT Chaplain

HR Case Management/Employee Relations

We have continued to see an increase in the number of cases with 50% of all cases in Housing & Communities. The HR and People Partner teams are working closely to manage all cases.

A Member's training session on the Appeals Process has been delivered.

Learning & Development

Work has been progressing with the Management Catalogue which will be a mixture of coaching/development tools and practical management tools for managers and aspiring managers of people.

As part of the Digital Modernisation Programme, we are implementing a cloud-based application called "Learning Pathways"; this will enable us to upload and store our own training content which will include:

- Coaching and live training events
- Recorded training videos

- Links to external web activities (TED talks, people and management focussed)
- Team building activities
- Coaching models
- Guides and policies (recruitment, absence and reviews etc.)
- Links to internal training material
- Departmental training videos and guides (e.g. finance, H+S, procurement)
- Performance management.
- Wellbeing guides for managers

A number of sessions on Change Resilience sessions have been delivered by Carol Carpenter with more specific sessions aimed at staff working at the depot.

Recruitment

This has been a busy quarter with 50 roles being advertised and recruited for internally and externally. There is still some challenges in recruiting certain skillsets including:

Specialist Estates Surveyor, Mechanical & Electrical Specialist, Planning Specialist Business Change Manager, Case Manager Housing Executive

We still to continue to appoint and develop from our existing staff where possible.

Roles Advertised

June		
	Internal	External
30	13	9
July		
	Internal	External
14	5	3
August		
	Internal	External
6	1	0

The plan for entire remodelling of the recruitment process has continued with the new, leaned recruitment process published on the intranet and supporting documents.

Staff Support

- Guidance and support for Managers managing remotely
- Variety of support to individuals and teams regarding home working, managing work/life balance during lockdown, mental health and resilience support
- DSE guidance for homeworking
- Working with the county-wide Workforce Recovery Cell to share best practice and consistency of approach

ICT Services

Infrastructure Team

The Infrastructure team have been working closely with external contractors to improve the resilience of the ICT estate, which has put SWT in a much better position with regards to Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity. The team are also currently working with the project to deliver the M365 suite of software, which will increase support for an agile workforce.

Service Desk Team

Currently supporting the upgrade to Windows 10 Enterprise for all laptops in readiness for the move to the new SharePoint Online.

Applications Team

Further application upgrades and patches have been completed (for Open Revenues, DRS and Insight), to keep the application estate up to date and in support. Ongoing pieces of work are underway to update some application servers to newer Windows versions, we are working to implement pieces of work for the Digital Modernisation programme as well as other project work throughout the authority.

Governance and Democracy

Continue to work on projects of:

- Member Training
- Council Governance Arrangements
- Community Governance review for Taunton
- Servicing the ordinary and special meetings scheduled

Live streaming and watching of Council committee meetings is still proving popular and is reaching more people than meetings held in the Chamber. The statistics for July to the date of this report, are as follows:

Webcast title	Live date	All views	Live views	Archive views
SWT Scrutiny Committee	01/07/20 18:15	2	0	2
Taunton Charter Trustees	02/07/20 18:00	1	0	1
SWT Full Council	07/07/20 18:15	0	0	0
SWT Planning Committee	09/07/20 13:00	0	0	0
SWT Executive	15/07/20 18:15	1	0	1
SWT Planning Committee	16/07/20 13:00	0	0	0
SWT Tenants Strategic Group	20/07/20 16:00	0	0	0
SWT Planning Committee	23/07/20 13:00	1	0	1
SWT Scrutiny Committee	05/08/20 18:15	0	0	0
SWT Planning Committee	06/08/20 13:00	2	0	2
SWT Audit, Governance and Standards Committee	10/08/20 18:15	3	0	3
SWT Executive	19/08/20 18:15	0	0	0
SWT Planning Committee	20/08/20 13:00	96	53	43
SWT Full Council	25/08/20 18:15	33	12	21
Taunton Charter Trustees	27/08/20 18:00	20	3	17
SWT Scrutiny Committee	02/09/20 18:15	43	11	32
SWT Planning Committee	03/09/20 13:00	39	14	25
SWT Audit, Governance and Standards Committee	07/09/20 18:15	28	11	17
SWT Scrutiny Committee	09/09/20 18:15	26	13	13
SWT Full Council	10/09/20 18:15	50	25	25

Finance and Procurement

Priorities for the finance and procurement service has continued to be around ensuring delivery of core business and support various measures in response to COVID.

Significant additional work has been required to complete weekly and monthly reports to central Government on the estimated financial implications of Coronavirus, and on implementing grants and business rates holidays for eligible businesses across the district. Government has recently provided details of an income loss compensation scheme, which helps to offset some of the reduction in our sales, fees and charges income due to Coronavirus measures and economic downturn. The finance team is working with services to measure these losses and will submit 3 claims during the year – the first being due at the end of September.

The service is focussing on implementing improvements in some areas, notably in budget monitoring where we are developing a new budget monitoring monthly reporting process to make financial information more easily accessible for budget holders, resulting in improved financial control and better information for the leadership team.

The 2019/20 Unaudited Statement of Accounts was approved by the S151 Officer on 13 August, ahead of the 31 August statutory deadline, and this is published on the Council's website. The external auditor is currently completing their work to provide assurance over the accuracy of these.

Some key reports will be progressing through to committees during September and October. These are scheduled to go to Scrutiny on 30 September and the Executive on 28 October:

- 2019/20 Budget Outturn – this report will set out how the Council performed against its first annual budget last year.
- 2020/21 Budget Monitoring – this will show progress against this year's budget and summarise the forecast impact of COVID on our finances.
- 2021/22 Financial Strategy – this includes an update of the medium term financial projections and an outline of the approach to balancing the budget in future.

Overall the Council has strengthened its reserves position which places us in a strong position to mitigate the net impact of COVID on the current year's expenditure increases and income losses, as well as provide flexibility to support the budget in future. This is set out in some detail in the above reports, and I encourage members to review these.

Work will focus in the next 2-3 months on the detailed planning and work needed to prepare the draft budget for next financial year, with progress due to be reported to Members before Christmas.