

Full Council Meeting – 7 July 2020

Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources

Overview

To say the last few months since my last report For the Council have been unexpected - and a huge challenge for everyone at Somerset West and Taunton Council - would be a huge understatement.

To say that that all of the staff have responded and adapted well in this crises is also a huge understatement. The staff have all been magnificent in the response to the Covid crisis. So many staff have been re deployed from their usual roles to support the Council response to Covid.

It's incredible to think that all of the work that is usually performed by the council and the Covid response has almost all taken place with staff working from home. A huge huge change for staff and I thank everyone for everything they have done.

Now we seem to be gradually easing out of lockdown we are able to focus on issues which we had started before Covid and which had to be paused, and also to think about how does the Council work in a Covid or post Covid world.

I am pleased to say that the work on the living wage accreditation policy had started again as has work on the hidden disabilities employment strategy. By the end of July we will have a clear path for the implementation of both these exciting new policies. We have also started the process of conducting a full governance review for the Council. This piece of work is long overdue and should have taken place years ago and I'm excited to work with all Councillors on this.

Finally I want to thank all of the staff for the incredible work they have been doing and how they have all personally adapted to working from home. I have been doing this myself in my daily work role and I know how much it takes time to adapt to this new way of working.

Finance and Procurement

The finance function has been working hard to support the Council and its customers over the past few months. As expected, priorities have been heavily geared towards responding to COVID-19, but also to maintain focus on supporting change and maintaining 'business as usual' requirements. This is always a particularly busy time of year due to closing down the accounts for the last financial year.

Some key updates and achievements to note:

- Supported the quick roll out of business grants

- Monitoring the emerging financial implications of COVID reporting frequently to SMT
- Met additional reporting requirements to Government such as weekly returns on business rates holiday and business grants to the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors
- Supporting services to engage with and support key suppliers to manage risk to suppliers and the services provided to the Council
- Supported Grant Thornton with the delivery of their interim audit, adapting to doing this remotely due to lockdown (see their report to Audit, Governance and Standards Committee 8 June 2020)
- Continued to focus on year end 'outturn' – our financial performance against the approved budget – which will also inform the final accounts.
- Revised the financial year end timetable to reflect the updated regulatory requirements due to COVID, with the deadline for approval of the draft Statement of Accounts extended to 31 August, and the approval of the audited Accounts to 30 November.
- Worked with SWAP to reprioritise resources to support COVID response such as financial controls assurance and business grants fraud prevention support
- Continued to support the development of supporting process and information to underpin the delivery of the commercial investment strategy

The service is in the process of recruiting to vacancies in the team, to strengthen capacity as we plan to drive forward with improvements to financial control and reporting this year.

Governance and Democracy

During lockdown, and following the introduction of the Government Regulations, we have been able to hold virtual meetings and continue with our schedule of meetings.

The figures relating to the live streaming and archived views (i.e. watching after the meeting has taken place) are as follows:

Webcast title	Live date	Live views	Archive views	All views
SWT Executive	18/03/20 18:15	38	84	122
SWT Full Council	27/04/20 18:15	52	123	175
Taunton Charter Trustees	29/04/20 18:00	8	18	26
SWT Scrutiny Committee	13/05/20 18:15	19	37	56
SWT Planning Committee	14/05/20 13:00	63	37	100
SWT Executive	20/05/20 18:15	21	47	68
SWT Full Council	26/05/20 18:15	19	18	37
SWT Planning Committee	28/05/20 13:00	35	30	65
SWT Scrutiny Committee	03/06/20 18:15	27	31	58
SWT Audit, Governance and Standards Committee	08/06/20 18:15	9	22	31
Taunton Charter Trustees	09/06/20 18:00	9	18	27
SWT Planning Committee	11/06/20 13:00	40	29	69
SWT Licensing Committee	15/06/20 18:15	3	11	14

I am also very pleased to bring forward the report on Council Governance Arrangements which is on the agenda for this meeting.

Customer

The Customer area continues to be heavily involved in supporting the Council's response to the Covid 19 emergency. This has had some impact on our ability to maintain business as usual service delivery. We have been very successful in maintaining the critical functions, are making good progress with clearing backlogs and are starting to pick up on the delivery of key projects again.

More detail is provided below.

Customer Services

Recruitment - We currently have three vacancies in Customer Services which are being advertised internally and externally. We expect to interview at the beginning of July and have appointees in place by mid-August. We are working with the People Managers to develop a recruitment process that will work during Lockdown.

Performance - Customer Services performance in June so far has been challenging primarily due to the restarting of Garden Waste collections.

We have with the other District Council and Somerset County Council set up the Somerset Coronavirus Support Helpline, a separate 0300 number that routes callers with concerns to the correct organisation or District team. Call volumes have been relatively low on this line with Somerset West and Taunton receiving around 15-25 calls per day on weekdays and only 3-6 on Saturdays and Sundays.

Over the last 12 month period, the average abandonment rate was 9.4% (target 10%), and average call waiting time was less than 90 seconds in 8 out of the 12 months (we are aiming for less than 60 seconds).

Customer Satisfaction - We temporarily suspended 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.

Projects - We have suspended the Customer Outreach Project for the duration of the current Coronavirus Pandemic and instructions on Social Distancing, we will restart this once the crisis has passed.

We have been provided with a list of 562 'Amber Risk Level customers to contact, we have attempted to call all of the entries that had phone numbers listed and teams under Joe Wharton's leadership have completed personal visits to check that these residents are ok. All residents have been contacted and confirmed as safe.

Benefits

Claims and changes of circumstances are being processed within our target timeframes despite increases in caseload - Council Tax Support (CTS) caseload has increased by 7% between 1 April 2020 and 31 May 2020.

The team have also successfully applied a number of changes to help support claimants through the financial impact of Covid 1, eg applying additional hardship relief, extending the award of Discretionary Housing Payments, implementing the changes to Local Housing Allowance.

Revenues

The focus for the Revenues team during April & May has been entirely on applying extended retail relief to business rate accounts (to zero the rates payable) and on assessing entitlement for the small business, retail, leisure and hospitality grants.

To date the team have assessed over 3,700 applications and paid £38.4m to eligible businesses, whilst receiving increased contact from customers resulting from the financial impact of Covid 19 to apply for discounts and exemptions or to make payment arrangements

Income

The team have continued to maintain our daily direct debit extraction processes throughout the Covid 19 emergency thereby protecting vital income streams for Council Tax, Business Rates, Rent & Sundry Debts, whilst working closely with individual customers and businesses to resolve payment issues & make suitable payment arrangements.

People & HR Function

Key work recently and currently undertaken by the team includes:

- **COVID 19 Response and recovery**, ie: collation and on-going tracking of staff data; staff Support and communications; and Covid recovery (eg redeployment reversal back into BAU)
- **Remodelling & Recruitment** - the team supported the remodelling recruitment process, during which new, leaner recruitment processes were developed
- **People Function (Business as Usual)** – new and on-going work and focus on data & casework (eg: establishment list, HR employee relations casework, UNISON relationship); Culture work (eg a new Performance Management approach, transition to 'People Business Partners' and Directorate working, new 'People Culture' documents and People Policies review; Health & Wellbeing work (eg Stress Survey, Wellbeing Champions); developing the Learning & Development Programme

Strategy

- An **Annual Plan** is being finalised for 2020/21 which clearly sets out the Council's priority actions and deliverables to March 2021
- Following recent realignment of staff within the new Directorates, members of the Strategy team now within Internal Operations (and the Customer area) also currently continue to lead and support a wide range of work across a number of other Portfolios and Directorates (in particular work relating to

Housing, Communities, Culture, and Transportation), as well as Covid-19 related projects and tasks

Business Intelligence

Key work recently and currently undertaken by the team includes:

- Extracting & blending data from various systems to enable us to quickly identify 18,000+ vulnerable customers
- Providing data analysis & performance reporting to support the payment of the various business grants
- Developing the performance reporting framework to monitor key service activity and delivery of the Corporate Strategy.
- Continuing to improve the use of management information through data warehousing and new reporting software.

Operational Support

The team have significantly improved the speed of processing payments to our suppliers & on average we are processing invoices in less than 5 days – this ensures prompt payment.

The team are now processing applications for Discretionary Business Grants and so far have paid out circa £1m to over 100 businesses

ICT

Infrastructure & Service Desk Team

Server patching across the entire infrastructure estate, and upgraded Internet connections have been installed at both DH and WSH, this has increased capacity and provided resilience. Increased capacity has also been provided for remote VPN connectivity and now regularly supporting nearly 400 concurrent connections. Other work has enabled improvements such as: upgraded email system and Microsoft Teams to support remote working and the demand in homeworking communication, commissioned Emergency Office Space on the 2nd floor of DH. An IT Health Check of all ICT systems has also been carried out to identify any security\ vulnerability issues.

Applications Team

Year-end processes have been successfully completed for Academy (Housing), E5 (Finance) and Civica Open Revenues (Revenues and Benefits). System upgrades and patches have been completed for key business systems, (eg to reflect the Covid-19 changes), and an E-Invoicing solution has been implemented.

Digital Modernisation Programme

Information Management

Retention and Disposal - the new Retention and Disposal Schedule has been signed off and meets the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) (Data Protection Act 2018). Overview sessions have been provided to all employees (over 450 attendees) on how to cleanse their data and reduce the risk of unstructured data containing personal data being stored excessively or unlawfully. Cleansing work is planned during the summer.

The new Corporate File Plan - is in the process of being built and will replace the current network drives and legacy SharePoint sites. Once delivered, this will provide enormous benefits in terms of compliance, collaboration, integrity and

accessibility. A mobile and flexible workforce can access the right information at the right time from anywhere as the new solution is CLOUD hosted.

Microsoft Office 365

A controlled roll out of Microsoft Office has been highly successful. It is being delivered one step at a time to ensure all applications are adopted effectively. TEAMS was rolled out at an unprecedented speed – the project was delivered to everyone within a month with virtual training - all employees who have access to a computer are now using TEAMS for online meetings, desktop sharing and collaboration (during May 372 employees were actively using TEAMS for meeting and collaboration).

Programme Management Office (PMO)

We've filled the PMO function on a temporary basis in order to progress work already started to provide greater central control and rigour to the management of programmes and projects. A report has identified opportunities to improve the current process and governance, and these improvements are now underway.