

# **Council Meeting – 30 July 2019**

## **Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources**

### **Section 1 – Introduction**

- 1.1 This is my first written report to full council since being appointed as executive councillor for corporate resources.
- 1.2 I have 3 big aspirations for my area:
- I want the Council to be seen as an excellent Council for customer service and the way it interacts with all of our local residents. I want to see the phones answered quickly with a very low level of abandoned calls. I want us to keep encouraging people to use our online services as a way of contacting us and I want us to concentrate on very quick resolution of resident enquires to the point that residents don't have to constantly contact the council to chase up unresolved enquires.
  - I want the Council to complete the recent change and transformation exercise as soon as possible without any further increases in costs that have already been reported.
  - I want the Council to emerge from this period of change and transformation with a staff structure in place which delivers excellence in all areas of the council.
- 1.3 I also want to highlight some further aspirations. I want Taunton to have a town council and I want to have a debate within the council and community to test support for this. I want our Council meetings to be open to people outside of those attending meetings in Taunton and Williton. I want us to work towards live streaming of our meetings so local residents have opportunity to view our meetings as they happen. Many Councils already do this and I feel this is long overdue.

Regarding the areas which sit in my portfolio, I can offer the following details:

### **Section 1 - Customer - overview**

- 1.4 The priority continues to be the stabilisation of service delivery following the implementation of the new operating model and structure. Key elements of this include ensuring we are adequately resourced, providing training, multi-skilling staff, addressing backlogs, progressing the development of the new Firmstep system, working with the Business Analysts to improve processes etc. Good progress is being made in these areas.

## Section 2 - Customer Service - Recruitment

- 2.1 Interviews for a new Customer Service Lead are progressing with a very high standard and number of applicants and the appointment of a successful candidate is expected to be made by the 18<sup>th</sup> July.
- 2.2 Two of our Customer Champions have successfully applied for Case Managers roles in Revenues and we also have 2 vacant posts currently covered by agency staff. We are seeking to appoint permanent team members to these four posts and have advertised internally and externally. We have had two new team members join us at Deane Helpline limiting our vacancies there to one which we intend to cover with agency staff until we are sure it is necessary to fill permanently.
- 2.3 It is expected that we will continue to see talented Customer Champions move up through the organisation taking their customer service skills with them, when this happens we release them in four weeks to their new roles but it takes eight to ten weeks to recruit replacements, we will therefore normally recruit agency staff to cover the four to six week gap and ensure standards are maintained.

## Section 3 - Customer Service – Performance

- 3.1 Customer Services has achieved a significant improvement in performance over the last month although the delivery of summons letters has led to a spike in phone calls in early July.

	<i>Calls</i>	<i>Abandonment Rate</i>	<i>Average Wait Time</i>
April	23,666	41%	3 minutes 49 seconds
May	18,841	18%	2 minutes 58 seconds
June	15,026	8%	1 minute 5 seconds

- 3.2 All incoming requests from Customers, either by phone, self-serve General Enquiries or Emails are triaged by the Customer Champions to filter out any cases that they can handle themselves and route those that need Case Management or Specialist attention to the correct team for action. These requests are currently handled in one working day with no backlog. All incoming post is scanned by the Digital Mailroom which also has no backlogs.

## Section 4 - Customer Service - Satisfaction

- 4.1 The pace of incoming complaints has slowed and the number of compliments has increased. These are being managed effectively by the Customer Services team and significant progress has been made in improving response times, Freedom of Information requests will be managed by the Customer Services team following the same model and requests through Social Media will also be handled by Customer Champions as part of our commitment to the customer from 1<sup>st</sup> August.

## **Section 5 - Income**

- 5.1** The Income function is responsible for bringing in revenue to the council – including Council Tax, Business Rates, rents and miscellaneous income. Responsible for year-end process for the council housing stock, administering Right to Buy function, cashiers function, setting up, amending and processing Direct Debit payments in line with BACs guidelines.
- 5.2** Over recent months the team has successfully trained new staff in the Direct Debit extraction processes to replace staff who left through the restructure. This is a critical area in view high value of council tax, business and rents direct debits.
- 5.3** The team has suffered from resourcing problems due to staff leaving, staff absence and new staff requiring training. However good progress is being made in progressing training and getting the team up to strength.
- 5.4** We are progressing the cross training of all team members in all functions, with priority being given to the most critical functions.
- 5.5** We have submitted an application to BACs to secure a paperless Direct Debit licence for all income – once enabled this will provide a more efficient process for both customers and staff (i.e. we can process direct debit instructions there-and-then over the phone) and it removes paper and postal delays.
- 5.6** We inherited a backlog in the cashiering function of 3 month work following the creation of the new council and over the year-end period – this has now been reduced to 1 week i.e. the 'business as usual' position.
- 5.7** We have had to delay the automated debt recovery processes for miscellaneous income during the implementation of the Finance system for the new council. This may have some impact on collection rates this year, but we are actively working to recommence the recovery process.
- 5.8** Collection rates for Housing Benefit overpayments and miscellaneous income continue to be monitored regularly and both are currently on target

## **Section 6 - Operational Support**

- 6.1** The operational support function provides administrative & technical support to the wider organisation in areas such as procurement, supplier payment, timesheet input, invoice raising, Freedom of Information, purchase orders, travel & meeting requests, bookings etc.
- 6.2** Resourcing the team has been challenging, but we will be fully staffed in the next couple of month. Work to train and multi skill new staff and staff who have transferred is ongoing.
- 6.3** We inherited a backlog of supplier payments & purchase order requests (exacerbated by year-end and the merging of finance systems) – significant progress is being made in both areas.

- 6.4 The volume of Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) remain a concern, but we are introducing a new process additional resource in the Customer Service area to address this.

## **Section 7 - Benefits**

- 7.1 Benefits claims and changes of circumstances continue to be processed quickly and within statutory timescales, but we are still employing additional temporary resource to maintain this.
- 7.2 We do not currently anticipate any significant changes to the national Housing Benefit scheme during the current financial year, but are still waiting for confirmation from DWP as to our timetable for the migration of claims to Universal Credit.
- 7.3 We are starting to look at key software contracts for the provision of our Benefits (and Revenues) systems and associated software, as a number of key contracts expire within the next couple of years.
- 7.4 A revised Council Tax Support Scheme has been implemented this year to provide a single scheme for the new council. This is working well and we have received no complaints. This scheme will continue for the 2020/21 financial year, but our intention is to review it early next year to see whether we need to make any changes.

## **Section 8 - Revenues**

- 8.1 We are still dealing with a sizeable backlog of cases, which results from the combined impact of increased workload following the issue of new-year bills in April, staff resourcing issues and technology changes. A plan is being implemented to clear this backlog, which includes additional temporary resourcing & technology improvements e.g. offsite printing & posting.
- 8.2 We're continuing to monitor in-year collection rates regularly. Council Tax is on target despite the backlog in workload, but Business Rates is behind target. Business Rate collection rates tend to fluctuate during the year because one or two high value accounts paying slightly late can skew the collection figures. The normal recovery and enforcement processes are underway so where accounts are in arrears action is being taken

## **Section 9 - Governance**

- 9.1 I would like to thank the Elections team for all of their hard work enabling the smooth running of both the District, Town and Parish Council election and European Union Parliamentary elections held in May 2019. Planning and booking of the venues for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections taking place in May 2020 has commenced.
- 9.2 We are legally required to check the Electoral Register each year and the annual canvas starts in August and runs until the end of November. The

culmination of this work is the publication of the updated Electoral Register in December.

- 9.3** Following the election, the Democratic Services team have been providing support to Councillors through the Induction training schedule, 'Governance buddy' system and i-pad drop in sessions. The team is preparing to apply for Member Development Status in early 2020 and in October/November all Councillors will be offered the chance to have a one to one session to develop their own Personal Development Plan. Future training needs will be built around this.
- 9.4** The team have also been providing support to officers and Councillors in ensuring that Committees are appropriately serviced with agendas and papers going out in accordance with the legal timescales enabling Councillors to make appropriate decisions, and supporting the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive assisting with diary management and correspondence to enable them to carry out their role effectively and efficiently.
- 9.5** Following the changes to the Mayor role, the team are providing support to the Chair of the Council and the Mayor of Taunton in terms of diary management and arranging of events. This recently included the Armed Forces flag raising ceremony, and there is a programme of events that the Chair and/or Mayor will be attending over the next few months. Work has already commenced to plan for the 2019 Remembrance commemoration.
- 9.6** Register of Interest forms are now being chased for those District, Town and Parish Councillors that have not yet returned them. Once received the forms are scanned (signature redacted) and published on the website. There are 59 District and approximately 650 Town and Parish Councillors.
- 9.7** Corporate Governance: The Governance Manager has carried out a review of the Council's arrangements against the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) Corporate Governance Framework and is currently reviewing a number of policies and procedures that require updating. The Council's Code of Corporate Governance was reviewed and approved by the Audit Committee at their last meeting. This document will now be published alongside the Constitution.
- 9.10** The Council's complaints process has been reviewed and this will be on the agenda for the Executive's August meeting. The Council's Data Protection and Freedom of Information arrangement are being reviewed and will come forward to the Executive for approval in due course. Information on the website will also be improved and will include greater transparency on the Publication Scheme and data required to be published as per the Local Government Transparency Code.

## **Section 10 - Business Intelligence, Performance Management and Strategic Procurement**

- 10.1** The team are working to develop a comprehensive infrastructure for Firmstep. The decision was made to go-live without reports in place and current reporting capabilities are limited. Key data can now be extracted but new reports are required to automate the process and make it much more efficient.
- 10.2** They are also developing a range of performance reports and scorecards across all services which will feed into a regular report for SLT, and for Councillors, to monitor progress against the emerging Corporate Strategy. Alongside this they are establishing responsibility and ownership of the council's statutory reporting requirements.
- 10.3** The team are supporting the development of the Somerset Business Intelligence Strategy aimed at facilitating better information sharing amongst partners, as set out in the recent JSNA, and approved by Health and Wellbeing Board.

## **Section 11 - People Managers (including HR)**

- 11.1** The People Business Partner is currently working on the development of an organisational People Strategy, which will be brought to Council at a later date. She is also working closely with the Business Intelligence and Performance Manager on the development of a Performance Framework which will look at performance from an organisational level right down to the individual level.
- 11.2** The team are currently looking at the priorities across the Council and adapting their structure to meet key needs. They are also reviewing HR process right across the organisation to ensure a robust and clear set of policies for staff.

## **Section 12 - Technology**

- 12.1** The team's main focus is the service improvement programme which currently has the following streams:
- Improving our processes
  - Addressing our long standing known issues
  - Getting our infrastructure to a safe position
- 12.2** They are also currently helping to shape the internal change programme and ensure that the technology pieces are well scoped and defined.
- 12.3** The intention is to get the infrastructure and systems to a good, safe and up-to-date position so that the team can return to concentrating on business as usual, but this will take some time. Much of the software needs to be replaced and aside from consolidating duplicate systems from the previous Councils, the move to Windows 10 and Office365 are key priorities.

- 12.4** There are still some vacancies and recruitment is ongoing. The team recently welcomed Richard Breeding as the Applications and Digital Specialist; he joins us from the private sector firm Thomson Reuters and will be able to bring some new ideas and an innovative approach to the work the team is doing.

## **Section 13 - Finance**

- 13.1** The outturn report for 2018/19 went to the Executive on 23 July; these are provisional figures as the external auditors are currently undertaking their review. Finance and other officers are currently supporting the external auditor with any information they require. Their findings will be reported to the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee on 31 July.
- 13.2** Finance recently recruited new Case Managers to the team, and are currently in the process of further recruitment for two vacant Case Manager Positions.
- 13.3** Training is currently being undertaken with the team for both the existing staff in new roles as well as for new employees.
- 13.4** Work is currently underway to develop a new Financial Strategy for 2020/21 onwards, and update the current Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). The intention is to provide an all-Member briefing late summer before bringing the Strategy forward to Executive and Full Council in September.
- 13.5** Payroll have been particularly busy recently with all of the current staff recruitment being undertaken, the recent election of new councillors, and payment of people supporting the two elections in May. The team is looking at ways to build resilience in this area of the business.
- 13.6** Arlingclose have been re-appointed as the Council's treasury advisor with effect from 1 July, following a robust procurement exercise. The new contract is for three years, with the option to potentially extend by up to two years.
- 13.7** Members had the opportunity to attend finance, treasury management and audit briefings in June as part of the Member induction / development programme. These were well attended, and copies of presentations are available to all Members on mod.gov.
- 13.8** Members are advised that the Paul Fitzgerald (S151 Officer) has confirmed Emily Collacott (Finance Business Partner) is also appointed as Deputy S151 Officer, and will support Paul in providing financial advice and information to Members.

## **Section 14 - Change**

- 14.1** The team have identified the initial business functions and areas to be analysed (Accounts Payable, DLO timesheets, Environmental Health inspection devices) and are starting to review these processes.

- 14.2** They are also planning the re-routing of work to address backlogs (beginning with Revenue and Benefits) to reduce the pressure on the business.
- 14.3** The team, in conjunction with ICT and other key stakeholders in the organisation, are conducting an initial analysis of how the Council's system should be positioned to support overall objectives.

Councillor Ross Henley