

# Council meeting 8 October 2019

## Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources

### 1. Introduction

1.1 Charter trustees: in March 2018 the former Taunton Deane Borough Council approved a recommendation to carry out a Community Governance Review of the Unparished Area of Taunton. The Governance Manager is currently developing a timetable for this work and it will be discussed by the Chartered Trustees at their meeting on 2 October. I will work with the Chartered Trustees and Officers to take this forward.

1.2 The new audio visual equipment has been installed in the JMR at Deane House (see 11.1 below) and this will enable the live streaming of meetings in the future.

1.3 Wellington community office: I have met with Cllr's Wheatley and Lithgow on-site and talked to staff and the Customer Service Manager on site as well. I have an aspiration for an improved service for local residents here and am now launching a review of this facility to see what we can do to improve service at the Wellington community office. I want to involve all members, the town council and partner organisations as well in this process. I hope that whatever we achieve through this process we can use a template for services across the District also.

1.4 Deane helpline: I have visited the Deane helpline staff at Kilkenny to meet staff and see for myself the great support this service delivers to vulnerable people and their family and friends.

1.5 I want this Council to become a living wage employer and I will work with Officers to look at the implications of this.

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

### 2. Customer - overview

2.1 The priority remains on stabilising service delivery, but also starting to progress process improvements e.g. timesheets, purchased orders. Recruitment is now largely complete and we are focused on training new staff. There are still some backlogs but plans are progressing well to address them. The team is looking at staffing and budget requirements for next year.

### 3. Customer Service - Recruitment

3.1 Our recent recruitment run has been very successful with four new Customer Champions joining us over the last two weeks. They are initially being

trained on Council Tax and the Repairs service to improve resilience in these two areas and will be trained in all areas over the coming months.

3.2 David Thorne has joined us as a Lead and will shortly be taking responsibility for managing the Freedom of Information requests in much the same way that Jess McVie manages the complaints process.

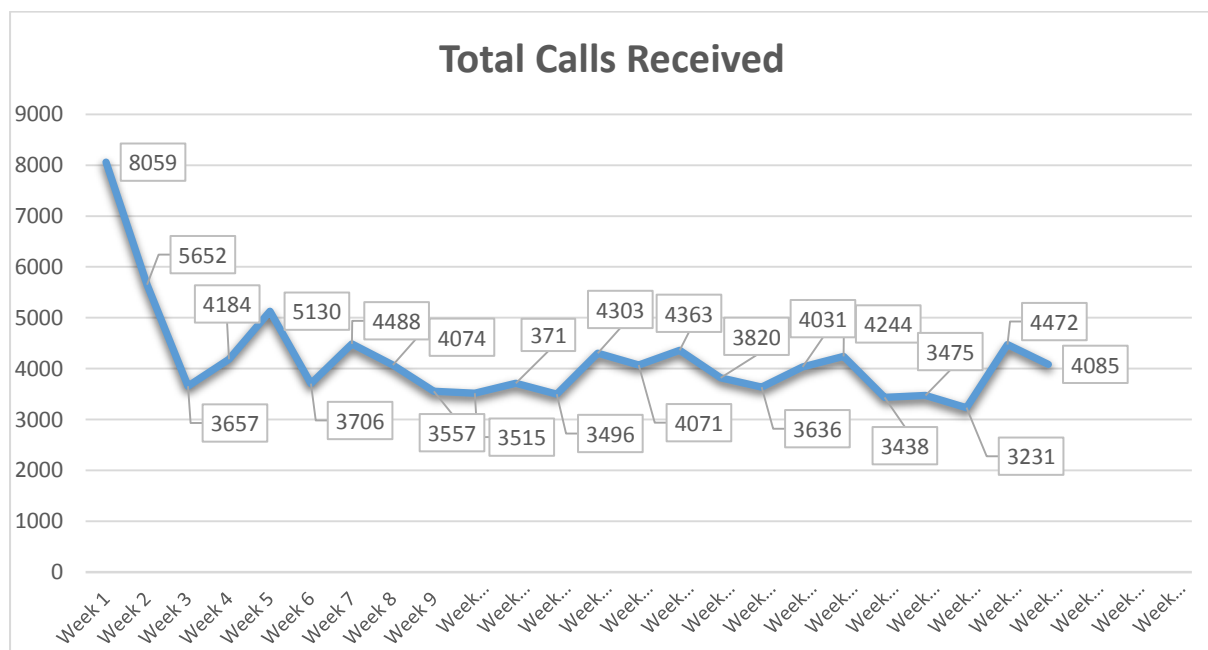
3.3 This brings Customer Services to full complement for the first time since April.

#### 4. Customer Service - Performance

4.1 Customer Services has achieved a further improvement in performance in September but as expected the delivery of summons letters in July August and the impact of summer holidays had an effect on performance levels.

	<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
July	18,284	12%	1 minute 51 seconds
August	16,025	18%	2 minutes 10 seconds
September*	10,909	12%	1 minute 38 seconds

\*Eight days of results still due in for September



#### 5. Customer Service - Satisfaction

5.1 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.

## **6. Income**

6.1 The Income function is responsible for bringing in revenue to the council – including Council Tax, Business Rates, rents and miscellaneous income (approx. £100m). 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.

6.2 The team is currently involved in the Lean process review for Rents income & will look to extend this learning to other areas.

6.3 We have now recommenced the arrears recovery processes for miscellaneous income, and reduced the processing time for the Business Rate and Council Tax banking control functions to under a week. We have also progressed our application for paperless direct debit and the relevant team members are now qualified to administer this.

## **7. Operational Support**

7.1 The operational support function provides administrative & technical support to the wider organisation in areas such as procurement, supplier payments, timesheet input, invoice raising, Freedom of Information, purchase orders, travel & meeting requests, bookings etc.

7.2 Getting the team fully resourced has been challenging, but we now have everyone in place & training is progressing well.

7.3 We have now cleared a backlog of payments to suppliers and now processing within 8 days.

7.4 We have undertaken a process review of the procure-to-pay functions and have identified a leaner process, which is being implemented.

## **8. Benefits**

8.1 The Benefits function is responsible for assessing & paying claims for Housing Benefit, our local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payments. The prompt assessment and payment of benefit is key to

supporting vulnerable customers, minimising debt problems and maximising income for the authority. The service is increasingly impacted by the gradual implementation of Universal Credit for working age claimants.

8.2 Benefit claims and changes of circumstances continue to be processed quickly and within the statutory timeframes.

8.3 We are currently reviewing and looking to improve our online e-claims form.

## **9. Revenues**

9.1 The Revenues function is responsible for the billing and collection of Council Tax and Business Rates which includes assessing entitlement to discounts, exemptions and reliefs. Prompt and accurate billing is critical to minimising debt problems for customers and maximising our income (we currently bill £99m for Council Tax and £60m for Business Rates).

9.2 Good progress is being made in clearing the backlog of changes of circumstances work items in Revenues and we are on track to be up to date in early October. At this point we will be able to release some temporary staff and start to pick up activities we have had to suspend whilst focussing on the backlog.

9.3 The in-year Council Tax collection rate remains on target, but the Business Rate figures remain under target. We are keeping the Business Rates collection rate under close scrutiny. But it is important to remember that Business Rate collection targets can be heavily impacted by changes to the debit payable or late payment by a small number of high value accounts.

9.4 The normal recovery and enforcement processes are underway and we are actively chasing those who will not pay and assisting those who cannot pay. We have identified a backlog of old debt where enforcement action has failed and are in the process of planning how to address this.

## **10. People Managers (including HR)**

10.1 To help us understand how staff are feeling in the new Council, the People team will be running a staff engagement survey and also an emotional wellbeing survey (also known as a stress survey) in the next quarter.

## **11. Governance**

11.1 The Audio Visual kit is being fitted in the JMR Room the week commencing 16<sup>th</sup> September and in the West Somerset House Chamber on 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> October. The Governance Team will receive training on how to use the

new kit following the installation. Once officers have had training, a couple of sessions will be done for Councillors before it is fully operational.

11.2 Elections – there are two by-elections taking place for the Vivary Ward and Norton Fitzwarren and Staplegrove Ward as well as the Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Plan referendum. We are also mindful of the fact that a General Election may be on the cards and there may be a need to divert resources from the team across to Elections if and when it is called

11.3 The annual canvas is continuing and any amendments that come through are being updated on the Electoral Register.

11.4 The Governance Team will shortly be asking Councillors to complete a survey on training and development. Councillors will then be invited to have a one to one Personal Development Plan meeting to discuss any training and development needs.

11.5 A number of training sessions will be rolled out to Town and Parish Councils in the next couple of months on Standards, Register of Interests and other ethical standards issues.

## **12. Business Intelligence, Performance Management and Strategic Procurement**

12.1 Work continues to develop a full reporting infrastructure for Firmstep. A new BI specialist will join the team in late September which will provide the much needed capacity to progress this work. Detailed and specific analysis has been undertaken for services where a back log of work has built up, and once processes have been improved, regular monitoring reports are being circulated to show the impact.

12.2 Key Performance indicators are being reported regularly to SLT, and a performance report for Quarter 1 has been to Scrutiny and Executive. In time, this will be supported by a suite of performance reports for all service areas.

12.3 The team have nearly finalised a list of all of the Council's statutory reporting requirements to ensure that we are compliant. Many returns have been completed over recent months, and a schedule for those to be submitted later in the year is being developed.

## **13. Technology**

13.1 The team continue to focus on service improvement but have recently had to focus on solving some infrastructure issues which caused the wifi to stop working. They are also updating corporate laptops to Windows 10 before security support ceases in January 2020.

## **14. Finance**

14.1 The Financial Strategy for 2020/21 to 2022/23 was approved by the Executive on 18 September. The Strategic Finance Advisor / S151 Officer led a Members Briefing on 9 September, providing an opportunity for all members to build their understanding of discuss the key factors within the Strategy. The Government recently announced the one-year Spending Round which will influence the amount of funding available for local government next year. The deferral of the Business Rates Reset in particular helps the Council's funding position in the short term, however we continue to face an ongoing financial challenge and need to ensure action is taken to balance the budget in future years. We continue to face uncertainty in our funding projections beyond next year, and will keep the Strategy under review and adapt to any further information that fundamentally changes our estimates and plans.

14.2 The Strategy includes establishing savings targets rising to £3m per year by 2022/23, and specific proposals will be developed through the budget process for consideration by Full Council in the Budget Report in February 2020. Of course, consultation with Members will take place during this process. Finance officers are currently working with managers and budget holders to update detailed budget estimates and an update will be presented to Scrutiny and Executive in the near future.

14.3 Grant Thornton are continuing their work on the audit of last year's Statement of Accounts for Taunton Deane Borough Council. It is anticipated the final audit findings report and opinion will be issued soon, in order that the final accounts can be presented to the Audit Governance and Standards Committee for approval.

## **15. Change**

15.1 The Change team are focusing on reviewing and improving processes across the organisation, as part of our review of what systems solutions might be appropriate to some of our work. Firmstep is one part of this work, however there are other systems which can help staff work more efficiently, and the key to this is improving processes initially. The work carried out on the Change of Circumstances process has led to a reduction in work backlog from 4500 cases to 1845, and the team are on track to clear this by mid October. These changes will also allow us to start reducing the additional staff numbers brought in for business resilience. We continue to look at ways to move to digital by default and encourage our customers to move to online self serve where possible.