

Annual Report of the Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources

Executive Member: Councillor Theo Butt Philip - Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources

Local Member(s) and Division: All

Lead Officer: Alyn Jones - Executive Director Strategy, Workforce and Localities

Author: Councillor Theo Butt Philip - Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources

Contact Details: theo.buttphilip@somerset.gov.uk

1. Summary

1.1 This is the 2023-24 annual report of the Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources. It describes the activity and achievements of services cross the Transformation and Human Resources portfolio during Somerset Council's first year of operation.

1.2 This report focuses on the five key areas of work within the Transformation and Human Resources portfolio. Each has had significant importance for the council:

- Progress of Somerset Council since Vesting Day on 1 April 2023. This includes delivering the financial and non-financial benefits of a single unitary authority and development of values and behaviours that we will work towards.
- Work to date on Local Community Networks.
- Asset and service devolution.
- Developing our relationships with partners.
- Our new, emerging approach to transformation to create a sustainable council fit for the future.

2. Progress of the Council since Vesting Day

2.1 Delivering the benefits of the new unitary council did not end on Vesting Day. As well as beginning to embed a new council in extremely challenging financial and economic circumstances, noted progress has included:

- Formation of the senior officer leadership team of the council. All services now have Executive and Service Directors in-post, which has provided leadership capability and delivered management savings in the region of £2.6m.

- Restructures both interim and permanent across a number of services have been continuing including additional senior management recruitment and rationalisation of posts, to release additional savings. To focus on the council's financial emergency and deliver a consistent approach to future changes, other restructures will now be part of the organisation redesign and workforce downsizing aspects of the council's new transformation programme (please see section 5 of this report for more detail).
- Delivering the savings calculated in the business case for a single unitary council. £18.5m were anticipated per year after two years of operation of the new council. So far, and subject to final validation, we will have delivered £7m of savings by the 31st March 2024. Another £9.7m has already been committed for delivery by 1st April 2025. A further £3.9m of LGR enabled savings have been identified (subject to decision making through the current budget setting process). Cumulatively this means we are on track to deliver savings of at least £20m by 1st April 2025. Clearly need to go further and faster than first envisaged.

2.2 During 2023-24 we have worked with staff and Councillors on the values and behaviours we want for our council, which we will collectively work towards.

- 56 workshops took place with staff across Somerset to discuss what values and behaviours would make Somerset Council a good place to work. Over 1500 employees and Councillors attended those workshops.
- Our organisational values are:



- We carried out a survey on these values and 96% of respondents agreed “I feel confident I can demonstrate these values in my role at Somerset Council.”
- For each of these values, we have detailed what behaviours we expect from colleagues, for example honesty and openness. We have also been clear what behaviours we do not want to see, such as blaming or disempowering others.
- These values and behaviours will underpin creation of the future council and the ways we work, for example the principles of organisational redesign and a new Target Operating Model.

2.3 Part of our work to develop a strong and positive culture even during these difficult times includes our obligations. In the last year, we have reviewed our health and safety practice and culture. In January 2024 the South West Audit Partnership undertook a high-level view of our health and safety governance at Somerset Council. Its purpose was to understand the health and safety culture here, and included a survey issued to all staff. This review concluded that the new council has worked to develop new and effective arrangements for ensuring health and safety in

the workplace, there is still work to do to embed those arrangements. After less than a year since Vesting Day this is a timely review showing progress has been made, with specific work to be done to continue to improve.

3. Work to date on Local Community Networks

3.1 Local Community Networks (LCNs) are intended to be a focus for community engagement and development for Somerset Council. With local partnership working at their core they will seek to improve outcomes for residents through establishing strong connections between Somerset Council, our communities and our partners.

3.2 In the last year 18 LCNs have been created, around natural communities across Somerset. They enable ever more collaboration by bringing together, at a local level, representatives from partner organisations, city, town and parish councils, community groups and residents. They are a forum for community discussion, engagement and influence, and increase participation in democracy and local decision making. Already they are:

- Identifying evidence-based community priorities across economic, social and environmental issues.
- Creating plans to reflect how the priorities will be addressed.
- Identifying and securing resource opportunities for local projects.

3.3 Our LCNs are created around natural communities.



3.4 LCNs first met in June or July 2023 in local venues and online to ensure nobody was excluded. In addition to electing Chairs and Vice Chairs, initial meetings focused on

starting to identify priorities for LCN's communities, building relationships and recognising what potential they have their communities. Initial priorities for LCNs cover a range of topics but often include children, young people, the climate and environment.

3.5 I have visited the majority of LCNs, either online or in person, to discuss and explain the financial emergency Somerset Council is experiencing. This has created a valuable opportunity for city, town and parish councils to better understand the implications for them and to discuss opportunities and possibilities in the context of asset and service devolution.

3.6 LCNs are already looking at how to solve local problems and take advantage of opportunities. These include:

- Taunton and Bridgwater LCNs tackling concerns over young people being involved in antisocial behaviour.
- As a result of serious flooding in some parts of Somerset a number of LCNs have convened a working group to identify the issues and consider how flooding in their areas might be mitigated. The Somerset Rivers Authority has also run workshops for interested LCNs to develop Parish Emergency Response plans.
- Building on the work of the Exmoor pilot all LCNs have been offered the opportunity to form a Highways working group which will be serviced and supported by Somerset Council Highways colleagues. Some LCNs are looking at employing Highways Stewards.

3.7 As we continue to review and develop the capacity of the LCNs we will build each local network to include a range of local partners and a range of community voices.

3.8 In the coming year our LCN Link Officers will become Public Health Ambassadors, further embedding the aspirations of the Improving Lives Strategy within our work in communities, leading to improved health and wellbeing outcomes for our residents.

3.9 We will continue to build LCNs as an inclusive and participative space where communities can work together with us to further develop and build place-based initiatives in a coordinated, joined up and resilient way to improve outcomes for our residents. We will also be considering the lessons learnt so far, including whether we need to tweak or review LCN boundaries.

4. Working with our town, city and parish councils and VCSFE partners, including on asset and service devolution

4.1 Somerset has almost 300 city, town, and parish councils, and several parish meetings. We value the immense contribution they make to every community in our county. They do so without remuneration, but with a massive sense of pride and out of civic duty. We have been working closely with our city, town and parish councils since the Government's decision on unitary for Somerset was first announced in

2022. We held two parish conferences in the run up to Vesting Day plus numerous workshops at village halls across Somerset as part of our Local Government Reorganisation programme.

4.2 City, town and parish councils were key consultees on developing Local Community Networks, and Somerset Council staff continue to meet online with parish clerks every fortnight to maintain that relationship and two-way dialogue, often with participation rates of over 80. This is an impressive turn-out for a mid-morning Wednesday slot, considering how many of these dedicated clerks are part time or have other jobs and other responsibilities.

4.3 Since the creation of Somerset Council, we have been committed to working with communities who want greater influence over local assets and services. Our city, town and parish councils have ambitions for us to devolve assets and service to them so they can make a bigger difference through local leadership. We recognise that not all parts of Somerset are in a position to do this, and that there are some concerns. This is why we created a programme of engagement with city, town and parish councils to understand their ambitions and how we can work together to achieve them.

4.4 Following a letter from the Leader of the Council in November, we have had responses from over 120 city, town and parish councils and there has been considerable interest stemming from that, with over 30 councils expressing an interest in asset and/or service devolution. Areas of interest include open spaces, asset and land transfer, and highways operations.

4.5 Building on this interest we are now developing priorities and timescales for devolution in the immediate term and over the next 2 years, including details of what savings and additional benefits are expected through devolution. Examples of work-in-progress include:

- Building on the initial pilot in Bridgwater to work towards completion of a significant program of asset and service devolution.
- Liaison with town and parish councils to ensure the continued availability of public conveniences.
- Significant engagement with Yeovil, Frome and Taunton Town Councils to deliver a package tailored to each area's needs.

4.6 Since Somerset Council declared a financial emergency in November 2023 our city, towns and parishes have stepped-up to support many of the services that our communities and residents value the most. This included looking to take on discretionary services and assets that may be at risk and could potentially be devolved. Conversations continue to be constructive and positive as together we seek ways to minimise negative impacts on our residents.

4.7 We have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCSFE). We know that improving the health and wellbeing of Somerset's population cannot be achieved by one organisation alone. It is important now more than ever that we recognise and build on each other's strengths. The Council has been clear we are a listening organisation, open to new ways of working and focusing on the outcomes for our County. Somerset Council is committed to building a fairer, greener, resilient, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the most vulnerable. We will only achieve this through collective action, and it is now more important than ever to work together.

4.8 Rather than just focus our individual challenges we now need to make the most of the opportunities – One Unitary Council, One ICB and the vibrant, creative VCSFE sector are the foundations of a positive way forward. The MoU symbolises a commitment to deeper collaborative working and provides the framework to get our collective house in order and act together. We recognise that as a local authority we need to listen to our communities and that actions speak louder than words. Change takes time and is predicated on relationships and building trust. The MoU presents an exciting platform for us, it is the first step and requires all of us to think differently about how we work together.

4.9 The VCFSE are acknowledged key partner for the Council and broader Integrated Care System (ICS). The creation of the new Somerset Council provided the opportunity to clearly set out the Council's relationship with the VCFSE sector and to develop both a broader strategic and more joined-up approach to engaging, funding and working with the VCFSE. Our Executive has recognised this and created stable, core funding platform from which we can now build from.

5. Transformation to create a sustainable Council

5.1 Executive agreed a new vision for a sustainable Somerset Council and associated organisational design principles on 6 December 2023 which will seek to deliver a new, smaller, leaner, more productive council. Achieving this vision will be complex and require whole organisation transformation to maximise the opportunities of bringing together the five predecessor councils and meet our financial challenge.

5.2 A new transformation programme for the council is therefore being developed. It will bring together transformation and change across the entire organisation to ensure whole council oversight and prioritisation of resources and investment. It will play a significant role in creating a sustainable council for the future, including redesigning the council and how it operates.

5.3 The transformation programme will:

- Deliver a whole Council approach and oversight, moving away from silo working.

- Develop a Target Operating Model which will bring our organisational design principles to life: people and skills, organisation and governance, technology, data and insights, process and measures, partnership and localities.
- Focus on providing impact and value to the people and communities of Somerset.
- Contribute to the financial stability of the Council, delivering significant financial savings.
- Optimise the workforce size and structure, prioritising operational effectiveness and efficiency while maintaining sufficient capacity to fulfil our legal obligations.
- Reshape service delivery to meet the evolving needs of the people of Somerset, maximising collaboration and partnership working, seeking to devolve services and assets where appropriate.
- Streamline governance, processes and reduce bureaucracy.

5.4 An outline Business Case for transformation including governance arrangements was presented to the Council Executive on 7 February 2024. Whilst focussing specifically on the Workforce Reduction Programme which is necessary to enabling organisational change and redesign, the reshaping of the council will come from two other programmes running in parallel: Organisation Design and Innovation, and Partnerships and Devolution. Alongside the original intention of Local Government Reorganisation and our need for financial sustainability, our transformation programme will deliver the vision for the council endorsed by the Executive on 6 December 2023.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The declaration of a financial emergency in late 2023 to respond to the unprecedented financial and economic challenges facing the county, and the impact on demand for our services has changed the way the council must work in the future. Critical to success is transformation and our workforce, working in collaboration with partners and communities, and creating a council of the right size that is fit for the future. By doing this, economies of scale, strategic leadership and partnership working will help us to deliver a more effective public sector in Somerset and a more sustainable Council for the future.