

Full Council Meeting – 15 December 2020

Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources

ICT Services

Infrastructure Team - The Infrastructure team are now preparing the deployment of equipment for the Infrastructure Refresh Project, replacing major networking and server hardware components. A review of Cyber Security is currently underway to ensure that all appropriate controls are in place and to identify improvements where required.

Service Desk Team - Working hard providing support to the remote workforce and have completed the upgrade of all laptops to Windows 10 Enterprise operating system, supporting the delivery of the new Microsoft 365 suite of software.

Applications Team - A major upgrade of the Finance E5 system has recently been completed. The Application team have been working with the Business Analysts creating further integrations for the Firmstep platform to facilitate COVID grants and payments. The team have also been supporting both the Digital Modernisation and Service Improvement Projects.

Information Management

Personal Drives and Migration to One Drives - All Windows 10 upgrades have been completed which has enabled the Digital Modernisation Team to implement One Drives as a phased delivery. This is nearing completion having included the following:

- Messaging and communication to clean personal drives to under 300mb
- Track, Trace, Cleanse and Delete core business data from high risk silos (personal drives)
- Implementing One Drive licence
- Train and migrate
- Directors have cleansed and have been migrated.

The New Corporate File Plan (SharePoint EDRMS) - This has been built to mirror the new Retention and Disposal Schedule and Information Asset Register. This has been signed off by all Managers and Leadership Team.

Shared Drive Cleansing - 48 workshops conducted over 5 weeks to support team cleansing of Shared Drives. Risk gradually being reduced.

Migration - Third party tool being installed November 18th to analyse state of current drives. Report to identify high risk redundant data will be run in the first instance.

Partnership working - Contact has been made with the Records Manager at Sedgemoor for first collaboration meeting for Information Governance.

National Exemplar - A national article released this week, SWT has also hosted virtual reference site visits from numerous councils including; Belfast City Council and Nottingham County Council. The solution was also demonstrated at a national Microsoft Forum with over 900 attendees.

Risk Reduction - Michele Noad presented to Audit Committee to provide assurance that Information Risk is being reduced following their audit.

People & Human Resources

Recruitment - During the last quarter, SWT budget was for 585.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. The average for the period was 549.2 FTE with 51.2 FTE vacancies.

October has been a quieter month for recruitment compared with September with a number of vacancies being held:

	Starters	Leavers
September	28	15
October	6	10

A Neurodiversity Working Group has been set up as part of plans to offer greater inclusivity to potential employees. Recruitment practices are being reviewed to offer an engaging and encouraging process to those with neurodivergent challenges.

I have just heard that the work we have launched as a District council on Neurodiversity has been recognised by the local government association. The local government association have highlighted our Neurodiversity work as good practice and have sent the presentation with a covering narrative to all English local authorities. This work is continuing and I have already met with staff who are working on all the different workstreams involved. I'm so pleased that Somerset's and Taunton has gained national record on this work.

Casework - The number of HR cases continues to be managed under a new system of working with HR and the People Business Partners making progress in case resolution

	New Cases	Open Cases During Period	Cases Closed During period	Total Cases
September	2	14	12	28
October	6	16	6	28

Sickness Absence - There has been a small decrease in reported sickness absence during October: September – 2.49% // October – 2.03%

The number of staff who have been on long term sickness absence i.e. > 4 weeks of continuous absence has reduced to 6 individuals who are included in the case management numbers above.

Reward & Recognition - A paper was presented to Executive to look at the viability of gaining accreditation with the Real Living Wage Foundation. Further analysis is being carried out with our suppliers to understand affordability.

A review of our pay policy is being scoped out to ensure we are meeting our obligations under equal pay reporting. This will include a review of pay protection, market factor and honoraria.

Learning & Development - The current learning and management system, Learning Pool, will be upgraded in the coming months giving managers greater access to training and development for their teams, including forward planning for mandatory training.

Apprenticeship scheme - We are currently in discussions with local colleges and educational providers to further develop our apprenticeship scheme for 2021.

People Business partners will be working with Directors to identify opportunities for new apprenticeships as well as offering our existing staff apprenticeships to support development in their current roles.

Wellbeing - We continue to support staff health and wellbeing with the following activities:

- Weekly Wellbeing Bulletin.
- Weekly Carefirst Webinars around a variety of Mental Health Issues
- World Mental Health Day campaign in October both internal and externally through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter sites.
- Providing guidance around schools and their rules for self-isolation.
- Wellbeing Survey conducted and feedback to staff.
- Produced a Winter Lockdown guide – lots of links and support offered.
- Working with our charity partner Mind, staff were sent a link to the Mental Health Guidance Video
- Learning Wellbeing Steering Group, which includes UNISON representation took place to discuss where support is required.

Change Team

Business Analysts

Test and Trace support payments process built and implemented with integration to Finance system.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax support claim on-line form launched in Firmstep to improve customer experience, reducing failure demand and providing a productivity saving compared to previous paper based process through channel shift.

Council Tax Support on-line calculator launched, providing customers the ability to self-serve by checking eligibility themselves

Procurement completed for out of contract spend relating to print and postage. New contract projected to save £22K per year, £66K over the life of the contract based on current spend.

Plotbox software implemented for the Crematorium providing integration into the finance system for sales invoices removing manual process and duplication of effort

Digital Enablement – Microsoft 365 Project

17 Change Champions ‘recruited’ from across the organisation, who will receive training and access to new digital tools and products and then help embed them into the different functional areas as part of an orchestrated change management approach

Testing of Microsoft 365 desktop apps (Word, Excel and PowerPoint) and InTune mobile device management software completed. In early stages of planning 365 training, with Microsoft 365 Learning Pathways Portal being deployed shortly.

Governance

The team continue to support and administer the normal schedule of Committee meetings as well as the further Special meetings currently scheduled.

The Council Governance Arrangements Working Group has now met three times and is analysing the feedback from the Member Survey and also considering the various models of Governance that are available.

Continuing to plan for the elections scheduled for May 2021 which are - Police & Crime Commissioner, Somerset County Council and any Town and Parish By-elections, which would potentially take place on Thursday 6th May 2021. Also reviewing arrangements to consider Covid-19 secure working practices in terms of the Election process – postal votes, polling stations and the count.

Health and Safety

National Lockdown - the H & S Team continued to support employees working from home, with particular emphasis around protecting the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable group. Access to corporate buildings was reduced to 'essential support service' teams only and COVID risk assessments were reviewed for all activities involving working within the community and working in tenant's homes.

The Safety Action Notice Policy was implemented alongside the performance management processes, to incorporate a robust process for managing H & S consequence, with a view to develop ownership and accountability.

H & S training courses. Work continues to develop a suite of courses, each with a corresponding e-learning package. Programme of delivery being planned for the next 3-6 months.

Risk Assessments. A project to centralise the risk assessment process continued, with the development of a cataloguing system to capture all risk assessment types, owners and review dates. The objective of the project is to improve the risk management processes moving forward and to make the information visible and accessible across the organisation.

H & S Committee processes for sub-meetings were reviewed and the groups were restructured according to the remodelling of the organisation. This included a review of representation across high risk areas and also some redefining of agendas, to improve the effectiveness of the groups.

Finance and Procurement

Among the key achievements for the procurement function includes

- Successful Procurement of Concession Contract for the 12 month trial of Electric E-Scooters.
- Commercial NEC4 contract negotiations with EA Framework contractors to enable completion of Watchet Harbour emergency and final repair works. Incorporating into the contract the emergency cliff stabilisation and rock armour works at Blue Anchor.
- Conclusion of contract Addendum negotiation with Capita for the upgrade of the Academy Housing Management System and migration of existing contracts into single contract for limited term to enable full procurement exercise to be undertaken for inclusive Housing Management System

The finance service has been focussing heavily on

- Continued preparation and support for the completion of the external audit of last year's accounts. The timetable for this has expanded this year due to COVID, meaning finance and other key officers are continuing to prioritise this requirement for a longer period than normal.
- Continued monitoring and reporting of COVID impact on costs and income. This has included the first periodic claim under the Government's income loss compensation scheme for which we have received £1.2m in grant to help mitigate fees and charges income reductions for April to July this year. The team is also supporting the financial arrangements for managing £6.6m of additional funding to assist local businesses adversely affected by lock down and tiered restrictions through to the end of next financial year.
- The finance business partners have worked extensively to embed improvements in our monthly budget monitoring and reporting arrangements, helping budget holders to effectively manage and control their budgets and report risks and issues to the leadership team through the monthly

Performance Board. The forecast against budget is brought to the Executive, through Scrutiny, on a quarterly basis with the Quarter 2 report presented in the December committee cycle.

- The senior leadership team and the Executive are continuing to develop the budget and medium term financial plan forecasts for next year. This is particularly challenging due to the impact of COVID both on services and financial planning uncertainty.
- The Customer AD area has been focussed on maintaining business as usual and over the past few weeks in preparing for the new national lockdown. Work has also been undertaken in each service area to identify our budget requirements for next year.

Business Grants

- The Government have announced new grant schemes (mandatory and discretionary) to cover both local and national lockdowns. We have been provided with a further £6m in funding under the national scheme for the current national lockdown. The Revenues team within Customer will administer the mandatory element of this scheme. We are working closely with the Economic Development team in Development & place who are picking up the discretionary scheme. Both schemes have had to be developed and implemented at short notice.

Benefits

- We are continuing to process new applications and changes of circumstance for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support and continue to see an increase in Council Tax Support claims resulting from the economic impact of Covid.
- The Benefits team are also picking up the processing of the Test & Trace payments scheme introduced by Govt. to recompense people on low incomes who are required to self-isolate. This has both a mandatory and discretionary element. This scheme has been developed and implemented in conjunction with Sedgemoor DC.
- The roll out of the improvements identified through the Lean Process Review is continuing and has seen the rollout of an online Benefits claim form. This can be completed either directly by customers or, over the phone, by our Benefits team. The form can be viewed at [https://my.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/en/service/Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit claim](https://my.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/en/service/Council_Tax_Support_and_Housing_Benefit_claim)
- Work is underway to plan for the year-end processes in March 2020. As part of this we are in the process of renewing the Council Tax Support Scheme for next year.

Business Intelligence

- The BI team have recently refreshed the dataset to help identify vulnerable people who may require assistance through the current lockdown.
- We are continuing to progress the development of corporate governance processes for performance, risk and audit actions.
- Significant progress has been made in conjunction with Property Services in clearing the backlog of work relating to our Property Terrier.

Strategy Specialist

- The Internal Operations Strategy Specialist is overseeing the development and launch of the mandatory element of the new national lockdown business grants scheme.
- We are progressing the development of the Customer Access & Experience Programme. The programme will be a key pillar of the ambition for SWT '*To be known for effortless and trusted customer service and for us to do it in a financially sustainable way*'.
- A half yearly progress review against the 2020/21 Corporate Annual Plan actions has been completed and progress is being reported to the December Scrutiny and Executive meetings. Work is commencing in drafting Directorate plans for 2021/22, upon which the 2020/21/22 Annual Corporate Plan will be created in order that the public have sight of the key projects and actions the Council will be pursuing for the year ahead (from 1 April 2021).

Customer Services & Deane Helpline

- Call answering times have been well within target for the second quarter of the financial year (target of 90% answered in under 60 seconds and we're achieving 96%).
- In view of the second national lockdown we have had to close the Deane House reception desk and the Visitor Centre. The Customer Contact staff are in the process of contacting people classed as being extremely vulnerable to Covid to see if they require help or assistance.
- Work is being undertaken to progress the changes identified from the recent review of corporate complaints. This includes bringing in additional resourcing in the short term to respond to complaints, implementing computer software changes to improve the process and the development and delivery of training to services across the organisation.
- We are in the process of migrating the Deane Helpline call answering function to a solution that enables home working.

Income

- We are continuing to process and collect direct debits for our major income streams without Covid having any major impact. Invoicing and collection activity for miscellaneous income is ongoing. The administration of the 'right to buy' function continues as normal.
- We are closely monitoring our recovery activity and approach for Council Tax and Business Rates in view of the ongoing impact of Covid. The emphasis is very much on getting customers experiencing problems to contact us in order that we can provide advice and make payment arrangements.
- Planning has started in relation to the Rents year-end processes and we are putting in place additional contingency arrangements in view of Covid.

Operational Support

- Additional support has been provided recently to the Environmental Health team to help them to contact all of our local food businesses in preparation for EU Exit.

- The team continue to maintain business as usual activity around ensuring prompt payment to suppliers, processing purchase orders, scanning of incoming post.

Programme Management Office (PMO)

- Work is progressing to implement a new reporting and monitoring framework for our major programmes and projects. This will, in due course, provide for quarterly reporting to Members and will link to the delivery of the Corporate Strategy objectives.

Revenues

- The team are picking up the processing of the mandatory business grants scheme for the current national lockdown. We have designed the scheme to work with information already collected from businesses during the first lockdown in order to speed up the claims and payment processes.
- The team were on top of the day-to-day processing of liability changes prior to stating processing the business grants, but the necessity of diverting resource may impact on day-to-day processing.
- We are also now actively preparing for the year-end new year billing process in March 2020. This year, because of Covid, we are having to put in place additional contingency arrangements and are looking to undertake as much of the process as possible remotely.
- Work is ongoing with Sedgemoor to assist with their in-house Revenues & Benefits system rebuild.