

Full Council Meeting – 7 December 2021

Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources

Customer

Benefits

- The Revs & Bens system integration exercise was successfully completed in October 2021. This means that all of the former West Somerset & TDBC data has been integrated into a single database, which enables quicker and easier system admin, report running etc.
- We have successfully implemented automated processing for circa 50% of change notifications received from the DWP. We receive around 50,000 of these per annum so being able to process half automatically has a significant impact.
- Day-to-day processing is up to date enabling us to actively increase the number of claim reviews – these enable us to identify incorrect payments, potential fraud and to maximise our subsidy payment.
- Ongoing administration of the Test & Trace payments scheme. The scheme will now continue until 31 March 2022.
- Planning has now commenced for the year-end / new year billing processes in March 2022.

Business Intelligence, Performance & Programme Management Office

- Our corporate performance management processes have recently been audited and the auditors reported a finding of 'substantial assurance'. This reflects the significant improvement in our performance management processes over the past 18 months and the hard work of the team.
- The quarter 2 performance report has been produced and will go to Scrutiny & the Executive in Dec 2021.
- Work is ongoing to further improve & refine our corporate performance and risk processes.
- Ongoing support for the business grants reconciliation, data provision & post payment assurance work.
- We will in the near future be starting to produce and share data with the other authorities to assist in the transition to unitary.

Customer Services & Deane Helpline

- The Deane Helpline continues to function as normal.
- We have continued to see ongoing high volumes of calls in the Customer Contact Team, which is impacting on our key performance indicators.
- We have added additional resource to the team in anticipation of an increase in calls resulting from the launch of Recycle More. This is paying dividends and, whilst calls have increased, we are coping with the calls and are not experiencing some of the issues faced by the other districts.
- The team are working closely with the Housing Service to develop and implement a plan to improve our responses to calls from tenants. Additional training has been provided to our Customer Champions.

- Our Taunton and Williton hubs have been open since July, but footfall continues to remain low – as a result of Covid the majority of customers have ‘channel shifted’ to the phone or online.
- A number of staff within the Customer Contact Team are moving onto other roles within the organisation. This is normal, as the team is very much an entry point into the council, but will potentially mean some disruption whilst we recruit and train new staff.

Income

- Day-to-day processing continues as normal with no issues (i.e. direct debits for Council Tax, Business Rates, Rents & Miscellaneous income, the transmission of BACS payments, the issue of invoices, the administration of ‘right to buy’) continues as normal.
- The enforcement arrears project has now commenced. This will focus on dealing with a backlog of Council Tax and Business Rate arrears. The approach taken will focus on encouraging contact from people or businesses in debt so that we can agree realistic payment arrangements with them. Essentially the aim is to help ‘get people out of debt and not to just debt out of people’.
- The team continue to provide vital support in the development and implementation of the new Housing system.
- We’re actively looking to increase e-invoicing in order to reduce costs & reduce paper usage.

Operational Support

- Day-to-day work and processing continues as normal and the team are continuing to provide support across the organisation for procuring goods and services, the digital mailroom, paying suppliers, ad hoc support as required.
- We are continuing to exceed our target for supplier payments and are currently paying 97% within payment terms.
- We have implemented changes to our outgoing mail processes to reduce costs, but this has increased the workload within the digital mailroom.

Revenues

- The Revs & Bens system integration exercise was successfully completed in October 2021. This means that all of the former West Somerset & TDBC data has been integrated into a single database, which enables quicker and easier system admin, report running etc.
- Good progress is being made with tackling a processing backlog.
- The Team have commenced planning for the year-end / new year billing processes in March 2022. As part of this process we will need to implement the further business rate reliefs announced in the budget.

Strategy

- A progress update in respect of the Annual Plan actions has been included with the Quarter 2 Performance Monitoring report.
- Work is ongoing to support the development of directorate plans for next year.
- We are starting to look at the development of next year’s annual plan.

Finance and Procurement

The procurement function continues to support core purchasing activity for and with services across the Council. Recent areas include;

- Development & Place – Construction and Repair of Tonedale Mill
- Housing & Communities – Supply and installation of new Kitchens and Bathrooms
- Housing & Communities – Supply and installation of new Central Heating Systems
- External Operations – Repair of Watchet Marina East Quay Wall

We are also supporting improvements in the Council's health and safety arrangements including, for example, ensuring our key suppliers can demonstrate compliance with necessary health and safety requirements, and updating our contract tendering documents to ensure contractors and suppliers who are awarded contracts hold and conform to current H&S regulations to in turn provide assurance regarding health and safety.

I am delighted that on 27 September the Audit and Governance Committee approved our audited Statement of Accounts for 2020/21. A huge effort undertaken by the Finance team and other colleagues in supporting the very extensive audit completed by Grant Thornton UK LLP, who issued an unqualified Opinion endorsing that our accounts provide a 'true and fair view' of our financial position and performance for the year. Even more pleasing to note that we are among only 9% of local authorities that were able to publish audited accounts by the 30 September deadline. A significant achievement!

The Finance team continues to manage the day to day banking, investment and borrowing arrangements – known as Treasury Management – of the Council. A report on performance for the first half of this financial year and the mid-year position regarding investment and borrowing is included on the Audit and Governance Committee agenda on 13 December 2021.

Mid-year Financial Performance Reports will be considered by the Executive on 15 December (following review by Scrutiny committees). The financial climate and external factors such as regulatory compliance requirements, supply chain and inflationary cost pressures, continue to impact on both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA). We continue to forecast various pressures including a significant drop in parking income compared to pre-COVID levels which is mitigated through one-off COVID grant funding, reallocation of in-year underspends and planned use of budget contingency earmarked reserve. The HRA is reporting a forecast overspend for the year (currently forecast c£0.5m), with the housing management team and portfolio holder focussing efforts on containing costs to minimise the deficit for the year.

Focus also continues finalising our budget plans for 2022/23. An update report is also going to the Executive on 15 December which highlights increasing financial pressures. We await with interest the Provisional Finance Settlement for next year to provide important clarity on our funding, which will influence final budget options and plans for the General Fund that come forward to Council in February. Housing Revenue Account cost pressures are challenging next year with work ongoing to finalise plans to mitigate these and present a balanced budget for next year.

Corporate

People Team Update

Recruitment

During the last quarter, SWT budget was for 660 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. The actual average for the period was 581 FTE with 76 FTE vacancies.

	Starters	Leavers	Turnover
August	3	6	1.04%
September	9	3	0.52%
October	7	2	0.34%

Sickness Absence

The level of reported sickness absence during the quarter was 3.89% compared to 3.34% in the previous quarter:

Personal and work-related stress continues to account for the largest amount of absence, making up 30% of all sickness, an increase from 25.43% last quarter.

Following sessions with MIND, Wellness action plans have been rolled out and we have re-engaged MIND for further support.

Service Development - People, Projects & Key Achievements

- A new Job matching process has been implemented to resolve legacy JE queries and a market factor review is under way.
- A new DBS process has been implemented and embedded as BAU
- IR35 status determinations are underway and the process agreed
- An updated OH process has been agreed and implemented
- A new recruitment approval process and induction process has been agreed
- All policies and guidance have been reviewed to go live on the new intranet by the end of November

ICT Services

Infrastructure Team - People, Projects & Key Achievements

Achieved Public Services Network (PSN) compliance.

Core Infrastructure refresh project completed.

Implemented a secure backup and recovery Cloud based solution, protecting our Office 365 platform.

Service Desk Team - People, Projects & Key Achievements

Upgraded iTop IT Service Desk system now in place, supporting Service Level Agreements, with initial data now flowing through.

Performance indicators to be reported on a monthly basis.

Applications Team - People, Projects & Key Achievements

Projects

- Housing Open Assets project now live.
- Open Housing project ongoing
- Open Revenues data merge project completed.
- Digital Modernisation project onboarded.
- Intranet project involvement

Upgrades

- Mod.gov
- DRS
- Bank Wizard
- Data cleanse from Open Revenues system achieving the removal of 1.6 million documents no longer required.

Governance Team

The Community Governance Review for Taunton is progressing at pace and is now out for public consultation on the first stage, running until 12th January 2022.

This is a key corporate priority for the Council in 2021/22 and since April of this year, Somerset West and Taunton Council (through the Community Governance Review Working Group) has been preparing the ground for a Community Governance Review for Taunton, and at the Full Council meeting on the 19th October 2021 members formally resolved that a community governance review be undertaken of the unparished area of Taunton and surrounding parishes (Trull, Bishop's Hull, Comeytrove, Norton Fitzwarren, Staplegrove, Kingston St.Mary, Cheddon Fitzpaine, West Monkton) with a view to the creation of a parish or parishes and council(s) to serve all or part of that area.

Comments are encouraged via an online survey on the council's [consultation portal](#)

Change Projects

Current projects and achievements

- Information Management
- Information and Records Manager representing SWT at the IRMS (Information and Records Management Society) conference in November on 'Records Management in Office 365 made painless'.
- Information Management Internal Intranet site live
- SWHT (South West Heritage Trust) SWT visit on site to kick off preservation process
- Corporate FilePlan change request process live

Firmstep Review

- Review of our digital platform complete with changes made to reflect customer and staff feedback. New case viewer implemented, which makes the management of cases much easier. There are now 72 live processes in use by customers, with 360,000 transactions and service requests undertaken since Firmstep was launched, with a current average of 11,700 customer interactions per month.

New Intranet for staff

- Work has taken place across the summer to replace the ageing OTIS intranet with a new intranet for all staff accessible on all corporate devices. This will enable access to the latest corporate and work-related information through an easy-to-use system built using SharePoint Online. By building this on an existing platform project expenditure has been reduced and the project has been progressed at pace. The initial launch was October with further content being added through the autumn.

Power Platform

- Following our investment in Microsoft 365, which has been fundamental to our ability to continue to work from home during the pandemic, we are exploiting the investment further by starting to utilise functionality provided by a range of apps that combined are known as the Power Platform, this provides the opportunity to solve business related problems and provide efficiencies by automating manual tasks, connecting data from different systems, analysing and reporting large amounts of data to provide better business intelligence and even answering common questions for staff and customers. The first examples (flowing from the pilot series) will show how the Power Platform can benefit the organisation and updates will be provided in the next report.

Health and Safety

H&S Strategy – Work Continues to define all aspects of the H&S strategy following both internal and external audits. The initial focus is on Governance, action planning, resource and technology.

Organisational Development

Current Projects

- Organisational Health Check is now complete – data is now live and organisational overview has been presented to SMT. Data now with the PBPs to work on with Directorate SMTs. Data directing phase 3 of People Plan.
- Leadership Development Programme – we have now begun work on this, starting with some sessions with SMT. Wider programme, provider has been chosen and we are designing the programme for delivery to begin in NY 2022.
- Continue to monitor the uptake of the new approach to performance management. Health check highlighted some areas still of concern and these are being supported to improve.
- We continue to monitor the situation regarding COVID19 and the impact on our working processes. Our offices remain quiet, and we have not been made aware of any significant issues. We will continue to monitor the situation locally and nationally, especially over winter.
- Digital Eagles recruited and launch session on 22nd Nov. Training between now and early January.

New Projects

- Supporting Sophie Morvany to launch the Excellence Framework in January 2022
- We are expanding the Corporate Team Employee Awards out to the whole Internal Operations Directorate.

Key Achievements

- Using data to build leadership programme.
- Digital Eagles programme recruited and officially launched.