

Full Council Meeting – 28 March 2023

Portfolio Holder Report for Communications and Corporate Resources – Cllr Benet Allen

Somerset West and Taunton faces its closure in fine fettle, with the organisation not just completing what it set out to do, but also **leading on projects with the other councils**, and in some cases leading the way in a particular areas, as we have played our part in creating the new unitary future for our residents.

We have done this with the backdrop of change and uncertainty from the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) programme as well as national initiatives. The council has administered Covid grants, fuel rebates and support for Ukrainian refugees while preparing for our own demise and the merger into the new Somerset Council.

Despite the pressures of inflation, fuel prices and the cost-of-living crisis, we anticipate closing this year **within budget and with an increased general reserve**. Budgets in different departments have been well-managed and we have safely navigated significant risks, including inflation and rising interest rates. Our external auditor, Grant Thornton LLP, has given us the all-clear in preparing well for this coming year-end. All this is thanks to the tireless work of the finance teams, giving excellent support and advice to budget holders, and **keeping our own budgets in good order** while implementing a new finance system and our wide-ranging involvement with the preparation for the new council.

The merger has taken up a lot of our time - policy development, recruitment of senior officers, transferring payrolls, checking training requirements and fixing pay anomalies for staff as they transfer across into the new council. Alongside this work, our Human Resources (HR) staff have been providing consistent and high-quality advice to staff, running a Leadership Development Programme, a 'Digital Eagles' programme and team awards available to all staff in Somerset West and Taunton.

The Governance team administered the elections in May 2022, while some members were seconded to help the County Council team with its side of the merger. Perhaps most importantly for the future of Taunton, their Community Governance Review has led to the **establishment of Taunton Town Council**.

Merging has also given our ICT and digital team plenty to do, with a Windows update to ensure security compliance. ICT staff have also worked on a new 'single platform' and a new finance system, implemented new software known as Open Housing, built a new 'intranet' site for staff use which has become the model for the future Somerset Council intranet - and worked on systems for thank-you payments for people housing Ukrainian refugees.

The Business Analysis team's work on these **Homes for Ukraine payments** has likewise been adopted by all the other districts and Somerset County Council - another way in which **SWT has taken the lead for Somerset**.

The Customer Services team have been dealing with a **very high volume of phone calls**, relating largely to the government's fuel rebate scheme and the rollout of **Recycle More** in the West Somerset area. The team has administered payouts of the government's **Fuel Rebate** scheme.

At the same time, year-end processes for Revenues and Benefits have been completed, as has the Rents year-end process, so all Council Tax and Rates bills have been issued, along with benefit entitlement notices.

Our staff never stopped wanting to do better, to provide effortless and trusted customer service. Starting from the 'ground zero' of the previous merger four years ago, they have improved continuously. We can all be **proud of their dedication and grateful for the efforts** of everyone in Somerset West and Taunton.