



Committee and Date

Council
13th January 2022

Item

Public

Report of the Portfolio Holder Resources

Contact: Gwilym Butler
Email: gwilym.butler@shropshire.gov.uk

1.0 Synopsis

The Portfolio Holder for Resources has responsibility for many functions delivered by the Resources Directorate including Legal Services, Finance, Workforce and Member Development. This report provides an update on key work undertaken since May 2021.

2.0 Executive Summary

The Resources Portfolio covers most functions delivered by the Resources Directorate, as listed below. This report provides an update to Council, setting out the crucial work undertaken since the portfolio was created following the local elections in May 2021. By operating under the ethos of a Single Organisation, all staff covered by the Resources Portfolio can align behind the Council's key priorities.

The focus for the directorate is to help improve staff wellbeing and support, improve governance, increase digitisation of processes, reduce costs and increase organisational efficiency.

Some very recent, key examples of how staff in Resources have worked together to deliver essential outcomes for the Council include:

- Coordinating the Council's Business Continuity and staff redeployment arrangements considering the Omicron outbreak and associated Booster Campaign. Pre-Christmas, these efforts placed Shropshire as the highest achieving area in the whole country. Staff from across the Council should be congratulated for their efforts; with the teams across Resources facilitating and coordinating our response faster and more effectively than any other Council.
- Delivering the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy in the most uncertain financial period ever in local government,

undertaking effective due diligence to create a robust budget for 2022/23 that has been brought into balance through strong engagement across the authority.

- Running the recent By-election for the Shropshire North constituency, delivering a flawless display under the watchful eye of national media.

Some of the key work undertaken within the Resources Portfolio and details of the aims and objectives for the future are provided in the pages below.

Service areas included within the Resources Portfolio:

- Finance
- Revenues and Benefits
- Commissioning Development and Procurement
- Treasury management
- Corporate Policy
- Legal Services
- Democratic Services
- Elections
- Scrutiny
- Member Development
- Occupational Health and Safety
- HR Admin and Payroll
- HR Advice and Organisational Development
- Risk, Resilience and Insurance
- Programme Management
- Shropshire HR – Commercial Activity

3.0 Strategic Finance

3.1 Finance

3.1.1 Financial Strategy

- Developed integrated approach and documentation to business planning and budgeting for all service areas, as the basis of building business plans and financial plans for future years.
- Delivered a Financial Strategy focused on methodically pursuing options to reduce cost and improve value for money and align with the Council's Climate agenda.
- Initiated an all-inclusive and collaborative medium-term financial strategy with Budget Challenge sessions from July 2021. The process included the Council's Executive Team and their direct reports undertaking budget challenge away days; Cabinet Members undertaking budget challenge away days; Financial Strategy Task and Finish Group budget updates and discussions; and other ad hoc group Budget Challenge sessions. External factors, such as the By-Election in North Shropshire, delayed some of the detailed consideration planned with Scrutiny and Task and Finish Groups.

- Provided the much-needed financial training to over 200 budget holders/managers to meet business requirements.
- Developed corporate level management insight to support and challenge Council services and team in relation to their financial performance.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Balance the 2022/23 budget at Council in February 2022 and put in place a robust plan for the following 4 years aligned to the Shropshire Plan, once published.
- Set a Capital Programme and Strategy that can and will be delivered.
- Set clear and visible Budgetary Accountabilities and responsibilities for all stakeholders.
- Produce a detailed Finance service offer and target operating model.
- Produce a new and detailed Council wide Debt Management policy.

3.1.2 Financial Oversight

- Launched the Financial Management Improvement Programme (FMIP) in May 2021 to align financial management to the Council's Organisational Principles and Corporate Values.
- Set up a stakeholder group for the FMIP incorporating budget managers at different management levels across all service areas. The group meet monthly to discuss progress and identify improvement areas.
- Drafted the Financial Accountabilities Framework for officers using the RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed) model. The model highlights the different states of responsibility a budget holder has over a particular task or deliverable.
- Implemented a new budget monitoring process in 2021/22 to improve accuracy of reporting and improve efficiency and effectiveness.
- Delivered Revenue and Capital Budget monitoring and Management Training to over 200 attendees.
- Implemented 'No Purchase Order No Pay' system in April 2021. This automated process created a huge efficiency and reduction in the number of invoices processed by the Payments team from an average of 1,000 per week to 200 per week.
- Produced the Council's Statement of Accounts.
- Developed report formats for financial statistical returns.
- Provided assurance to the organisation that financial oversight and delivery of plans has been verified through a sound internal audit process: with the Internal Audit Team having very recently passed a five yearly external assessment.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Minimise services processing large numbers of retrospective Purchase Orders and submitting large numbers of invoices late.
- Develop the report formats for financial statistical returns with Finance colleagues so they generate the returns, improving the efficiency of the production of the returns ongoing.
- Produce a Corporate Council wide Debt Recovery Policy.

3.2 Revenues & Benefits

- Rebilled over 3,000 business rate accounts to reflect reduced retail relief to 66% from July 2021.
- Went live with online landlord portal to enable landlords to access benefits information about their tenants rather than having to call the Benefits team.
- Went live with an online application form for Discretionary Housing Payments.
- Continued to administer the Test and Trace Self-Isolation Payment.
- Led on introduction of Breathing Space administration for Council debtors following introduction of Breathing Space regulations.
- Reviewed Discretionary Housing Payments Policy.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Return to pre Covid collection rate performance for council tax and business rates.
- Aim for at least 90% new benefit claims to be made online.
- Continue to review options to encourage channel shift.
- Increase council tax e-billing to at least 25% of all bills issued for 2022/23.
- Review Debt Collection Policy.

3.3 Commissioning Development & Procurement

- Developed and implemented a Council wide Commissioning Plan.
- Reviewed the Council's Social Value offer linked to procurement and implemented a Social Value Fund Pilot.
- Commissioned Carbon reduction work around contractor response.
- Introduced an electronic signature solution removing the reliance on paper and 'wet' signatures for contracts and associated documents.
- Contributed to the Council's Annual Anti Modern Slavery Statement and plan.
- Facilitated the Serious & Organised Crime Prevention Action Plan.
- Delivered Procurement, Commissioning and Contract Management Training for Officers.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Publish and develop of the Commissioning Plan.
- Complete Social Value Social Fund pilot and develop governance around the fund.

- Develop and implement Carbon Reduction Outcomes within our Commissioning & Procurement processes.
- Consider wider implications and development of Anti Modern Slavery and Serious & Organised crime action plans.
- Re-commission Agency staff service provision.

3.4 Treasury Management

- Generated significant Treasury Management savings - £3.21 million in 2020/21 and £204k generated so far in 2021/22. The treasury team continue to outperform investment benchmarks in the short and long term and investment returns compare favourably to peers as highlighted in benchmarking reports.
- Implemented and oversaw an increased loan facility for Cornovii Development Limited (the Council's housing company) to a £50 million revolving credit facility, restructuring existing loans to provide additional affordable housing in Shropshire, Shrewsbury West Sustainable Urban extension development, which in turn will generate additional income back to the Council in the form of dividends.
- Generated additional income from housing loans for the Council of £0.51m over and above investment returns. All loans are secured against properties ensuring security for the Council and much needed additional affordable housing in Shropshire.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Generate increased treasury management returns with the expectation that bank interest rates will increase in 2022/23. Every 0.25% increase has been targeted to generate £0.3m additional investment income.
- Create a cashless authority by progressing automated and efficient processes across the Council and reducing cash collection charges. Key areas to consider include car parking, leisure centres, Theatre Severn, shire services, museums, Shrewsbury Castle, Acton Scott and libraries.
- Undertake high level Treasury Management training for Members in Jan 2022 to continue to fulfil responsibilities in the CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) Treasury Management & Prudential Codes of Practice.

4.0 Corporate Policy

- Commenced work on the Shropshire Plan to create a new, high level plan for Shropshire reflecting the needs of our communities and the priorities of the Council.
- Promoted equalities in Shropshire and across the Council, with an emphasis on racism awareness. In Black History Month we welcomed Patrick Vernon OBE who shared his unique experience and insight informing a seminar for public and business sector

organisations across the region. The session focused on how individuals and organisations can better understand various forms of racism as well as racial bias, and the issues affecting the black community in the context of the current climate and black history.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Discuss and improve the Shropshire Plan over the coming months and years and ensure a golden thread flows through the authority and our strategic plans.
- Continuing to raise awareness within the Council and externally by championing equalities through policy and actions, and events such as the fruit tree planting at schools for Holocaust Memorial Day.

5.0 Legal and Democratic Services

5.1 Legal Services

- Supported the corporate governance of the Council and specific legal requirements of service areas, for high-profile projects and extremely challenging planning applications.
- Responded to extremely high levels of demand for the child-care team in responding to safeguarding cases. The number and complexity of cases, and the challenges of remote court hearings, continue to rise unabated leading to significant budgetary pressures which we will address through a longer-term structure.
- Commenced work with several other local authorities in the West Midlands to consider closer collaboration and cost reduction, for example, counsel's fees.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Integrate more closely with the Council to improve governance and promote a more enabling approach to our work with other services.
- Deliver a pilot with other local authorities in the West Midlands to create cost saving collaborative approaches.

5.2 Democratic Services

- Ensured a successful induction process for new and returning Members including scheduled times to collect IT (Information Technology) equipment under Covid-19 restrictions.
- Organised all face-to-face meetings in extremely difficult circumstances following rule changes which prevented formal meetings of Members taking place remotely.
- Ensured effective participation of the public and Councillors, who are not members of the Committee, as an on-going issue alongside the necessity to live-stream all events to an online audience.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Develop a more proactive support arrangement for Members through closer liaison with the Local Government Association to include member development and training.

5.3 Elections

- Conducted the Local Elections in May in unprecedented circumstances, both the lead-up and the count itself. Multiple polls were successfully completed, and the team moved straight into the annual canvass to ensure an accurate and up to date register.
- Delivered the North Shropshire By-election in December. This was conducted under intense national media scrutiny, and we believe we presented Shropshire Council in a very positive light.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Develop a longer-term plan where Elections are seen as less a standalone part of the Council and more a shared responsibility, with planned support from appropriately prepared staff activated when significant elections are called.
- Planning for the introduction of the Government's forthcoming voter ID arrangements which will entail significant additional administration.

5.4 Scrutiny

- Delivered online meetings successfully over the last 18 months with committees continuing to take advantage of meeting online where possible. The overview and scrutiny committees have returned to meetings in person.
- Agreed work programmes all five scrutiny committees for the year ahead.
- Developed a programme of online briefing sessions for Overview and scrutiny to better inform the committees' scrutiny of topics. These are proving valuable in supporting elected members to carry out more robust and insightful scrutiny.
- Supported the scrutiny of both the 2022/23 annual budget and medium-term financial strategy. This work identified several priorities for the People Overview Committee and Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as committee seek to ensure that budget strategy is aligned to corporate priorities.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Develop a plan to review and refresh the Scrutiny process with a renewed effort to ensure that it is involved at an earlier stage in policy development.
- Review Scrutiny work programmes when the council agrees The Shropshire Plan.

5.5 Member Development

- Delivered a programme of events as part of the Refocus agenda including a well-attended and received induction programme following the Elections in May 2021.
- Adopted and delivered training on the new LGA (Local Government Association) member Code of Conduct.
- Established a Member/Officer Liaison Group to further consider issues such as member development, the interface between member's and the Council, how to improve the Member's Gateway and members' experience of the ERP.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Review Member development in light of LGA best practice and an ongoing area of continuous improvement.

6.0 Workforce Development

6.1 Occupational Health & Safety

- Supported teams including Schools on the COVID pandemic which included guidance on risk assessment, monitoring of control measures, support for clinically vulnerable people, essential health and safety training including first aid training for front line staff.
- Launched, promoted and implemented the 'Looking After Our People' Wellbeing Action Plan across the organisation to support our staff to become happier and healthier and dedicated support for those front-line staff impacted by supporting the community during the pandemic.
- Awarded Foundation level for Shropshire Council's health and wellbeing programme by West Midlands Combined Authority. Thrive at Work is a workplace commitment with criteria and guidelines on creating a workplace that promotes employee health and wellbeing, focusing on key organisational enablers of health such as attendance management, policies and procedures in addition to health areas such as mental, musculoskeletal and physical health and promoting healthy lifestyles. Shropshire Council is only the second Local Authority to achieve Foundation level.
- System wide acquisition and issuing of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), and co-ordination of mutual aid with other partners such as Local Resilience Forum, Fire Service, Health colleagues, other local authorities for the support to care providers and internal services including Schools. Video of Care Provider – used for MJ (Municipal Journal) Submission.

- Finalist for the MJ awards 2021 for the Care and Health Integration for 'A system wide platform for responding to the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Supported the welfare of staff by organising the flu vaccination programme for our front-line staff to protect themselves and others and the roll out of wellbeing support and initiatives.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Continue to support the wellbeing of staff by direct intervention, support and guidance at all levels of the Council.

6.2 HR Admin & Payroll

- Supported, advised and provided guidance to the Council, Maintained Schools, Academies and external customers with all HR Admin and Payroll related queries/tasks. Vacancy rates throughout the Council have increased month on month throughout 2021, with many service areas requiring further and additional support with recruitment activity.
- Processed over 4,100 checks with the Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) to support safeguarding in recruitment/employment.
- Delivered a total of 53 payrolls each month, paying an average of 11,900 people.
- Processed, for council employees (excluding academies/externals) approximately 830 changes each month in the system that affects pay (starters, changes, leavers, transfers etc).
- Processed over 1,100 Home Working Allowances for payment in November and December.
- Provided significant support to corporate and schools staff in using the Council's ERP system processes, which has encouraged direct involvement on both parts in identifying process developments, some of which are outside of the system. Significant time and resource have been invested in resolving several processes and areas of the system that weren't accurate or working as expected, with focus being made on end-user experience. This work remains ongoing as part of the wider ERP review.
- Completed a comprehensive review of workloads and priorities, with vacancies identified and recruited to. This was also a consequence of remote working with the need to adapt to changing conditions and environments of the entire customer base (internal and external).

Aims & objectives for the future

- Review payroll processes to reflect remote working and to support the organisation as it emerges from the Covid pandemic. Further efficiencies will be realised once all customers are on the new system and the current Covid pandemic eases, allowing normal workloads to return.

6.3 HR Advice & Organisation Development

- Supported Schools during and post pandemic on HR matters relating to the situation including maternity, self-isolation, absences, risk assessments.
- Implemented the legal requirement for all employees/visitors to care homes to be fully vaccinated in November 2021.
- Administered Furlough arrangements: we averaged 350 staff per month on the scheme across schools and corporate, with over 800 per month at the peak of lockdown. We have also supported our external customers with furlough. This has been a long ongoing project since the scheme was introduced in March 2020, as what was expected to be a short-term measure for a few months and with numerous extensions finally ended 30 September 2021.
- Supported the Council in the redeployment of staff to support with critical roles in response to the pandemic. Working with NHS in setting up a rapid COVID testing staff helpline for corporate, schools, ST&RH, Veolia and academies to access.
- Developed New Ways of Working and employee reference group to shape our future ways of working, resulting in the development of our new temporary arrangements and allowances for staff over the next 12 months.
- Developed online training for internal staff and external customers to support with managing at a distance, resilience building and wellbeing.
- Delivered an international Tech Severn, annual digital conference focusing on climate change and sustainability [Main Conference - Tech Severn \(techsevern21.co.uk\)](https://techsevern21.co.uk)
- Supported the Senior Management restructure – appointment of the Chief Executive, Executive Director (Adults) and Executive Director (Resources) during and post pandemic. Subsequent restructure to create the new People and Health and Wellbeing Directorates from October 2021.

- Implementation of a new employee benefits platform, including Tusker car salary sacrifice scheme
- Paid, since April 2017, £2.1m into the Apprenticeship Levy; we've processed over 500 applications, have 213 are currently on an apprenticeship programme and we've had 64 employees successfully complete an apprenticeship
- Generated 60 placements across the organisation to support young people into the workplace through 'Kickstart'.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Currently reviewing the council's Workforce Strategy – to be considered by Cabinet in March 2022, aligned to The Shropshire Plan.

6.4 Risk, Resilience & Insurance

- Coordinated and facilitated the Council's Covid response from a Business Continuity aspect. The Business Continuity Group, chaired by the Risk, Insurance & Resilience Manager, met weekly to ensure a continued service response to Covid. This led to good working relationships throughout the whole of the council and helped to break down silo working.
- Produced various procedures to ensure we were able to monitor staffing absence levels, monitor where teams were under extreme pressure and required additional support in the form of resources and established a process for opening services again in a Covid safe manner.
- Developed the Council's Response to and Recovery from Covid plan.
- Moved the recording of operational, project and strategic risks onto SharePoint to allow real time access to the risks allowing risk owners to have more accountability for their risks and an ability to update them as and when appropriate:
 - 16 Strategic Risks,
 - Co-ordinate bi-annual reviews of the 1299 operational risks within 128 operational risk registers
 - Support the project leads and boards in the management of risk in 53 projects (623 total risks).
 - Facilitated 21 risk review workshops.
- Dealt with a high number of claims, in particular pothole claims. The team have been working closely with the highway divisions to help them gather the information required for the team to process the claims.

- Coordinated key responses across the Council. The Emergency Planning team has been exceptionally busy as a key part in the response to flooding within the county and the two exceptional flooding events were followed straight away by the Covid response. The Civil Contingencies Team Leader chaired the Excess Deaths Group for Covid which was a multi-agency group. Support has also been given to Public Health to help them manage their responses to Covid.
- Activated the necessary plans following the death of the Duke of Edinburgh to ensure this was recognised officially within the county and in accordance with the Palace requirements.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Reviewing our approach following a hardening of the insurance market and proposed increased premiums. We have increased the policy deductible on liability claims, which means the council are responsible for more of the initial costs of claims, however the premium charged remain static.
- Planning for the winter continues and work has been undertaken with local community groups to ensure a robust response to the winter pressures.

6.5 Programme Management

- Managed the development of a Food Hub to supply and deliver emergency food parcels to Shropshire shielding and vulnerable residents during the early stages of the Covid Pandemic.
- Prepared Shrewsbury Bowls Centre to operate as a Vaccination Centre.
- Established 10 bookable office hubs around the County to compliment home working as part of a blended/hybrid working model. As part of this project, the upper 3 floors of Shirehall were vacated, freeing up equipment for use by staff at home and at other sites and allowing for mothballing of these floors to reduce building running costs.
- Supported the development of a Business Wide Refocus Programme that will co-ordinate the Council's transformation activities in relation to Organisation & Process; People; Assets & Resources; Tools & Systems and Customers & Partners.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Supporting a refreshed Refocus Programme aligned to The Shropshire Plan and associated financial and capital plans.

6.6 Shropshire HR – Commercial Activity

- Traded commercially with over 300 customers and generated an income of £1.1m per year. Customers include Schools, Academies/MATs, Colleges, Town & Parish Councils, Charities, SME's.

- Delivered commercial Training and Development and hosted several Conferences. In 2021 we delivered a virtual leadership conference to over 500 leaders across the Country creating a revenue of approx. £27,000.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Consider a different commercial approach and potential new offerings, which will be developed as service offerings are overhauled.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Gwilym Butler

Local Member

All

Appendices

None.