

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 27 July 2017

Subject: Technology and Support Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor A Lion

Recommending:

That the report of the Technology and Support Services Portfolio Holder be noted

Support Services

Apprentice Recruitment

The new cohort of apprentices is currently being recruited to start in September 2017 and consists of 9 Business Administration and 1 Construction apprentice. Members may have seen the scheme advertised in the Epping Forest Guardian and there is a social media campaign which will run for 3 weeks. The campaign was designed by Becky Linford, current 'Apprentice of the Year' who will also be involved in mentoring the new cohort.

As part of this scheme Human Resources is working in partnership with Essex County Council NEET Team (Not in Employment, Education or Training Team) to shortlist CV's for this programme, which we have done for the previous 2 cohorts.

The Essex NEET Team gives the Council access to data on all the Young People in the district and what they are planning to do after leaving school i.e. college, employment, and apprenticeships. The Essex NEET Team communicate and market the Council's apprenticeship programme to young people and schools, this is in addition to our own advertising and we have found that social media has been very successful.

The Apprenticeship Programme is also being run in partnership with the Council's preferred Housing Associations, who fund 2 of the 10 places. As part of the recruitment process all suitable applicants will be invited to a week-long in-house course where they will have the opportunity to learn new skills such as team working, communication, budgeting and interview skills.

Similar to the previous 2 cohorts, successful apprentices will move around the organisation 4 times in the 2 years, spending 6 months at a time in different work placements and have the opportunity to complete a Level 2 apprenticeship framework qualification, whilst receiving monthly mentoring from the Council's internal coaches.

I am delighted to report that in total 12 apprentices from the first 2 cohorts remain employed in permanent roles across the Council; they continue to develop and are involved in further qualifications and training.

Sickness Absence

I am pleased to inform Members that the sickness absence outturn figure for the Council has reduced from an average of 7.99 days per employee in 2015/16 to an average of 6.71 days

in 2016/17. The Council will also be below the target set for last year which was an average of 7.5 days per employee.

Automated notifications are sent to Managers on a weekly basis regarding their employees who exceed the Council's limits (of 8 days and/or 5 occasions or more). Systems are in place to ensure that sickness absence is managed in a timely and appropriate way.

i-Trent Employee Self Service System

From December 2016, the Council's employees have been paid through the new i-Trent Human Resources and Payroll system. The most recent phase of the rollout of i-Trent gave employees access to the Employee Self-Service (ESS) module from late-May 2017 and all employees can now access, update and view their own personnel, employment and pay records electronically. Consequently, as of the July 2017 pay run, employees will no longer receive a paper payslip and can download or print their payslips through the ESS module.

The ESS facility will be switched on for the payment of member's allowances within the next few months and will be highlighted by an item in the Council Bulletin shortly. Individual login details will be issued to each member and a demonstration of the ESS system will be held before the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 31 October 2017, although officers of Human Resources will be available in the meantime to resolve difficulties with the use of the ESS system. Members will continue to receive a paper payslip for the next two quarterly pay runs (July and October 2017) and, once they are confident on how to access and view payslips, the switch to electronic delivery will be made.

Facilities

The team are busy scheduling works arising in year 1 of the 5 year planned maintenance programme 2017-2022 for operational and commercial properties, such as the Civic Offices, Depots, North Weald Airfield, shop units, the Limes Centre and many more buildings across the district.

Specifications are being drawn up in order to progress projects going forward. At North Weald Airfield the dilapidated single glazed timber windows, doors and roof lights to the gatehouse are to be replaced with new thermally efficient double glazed aluminum units and the control tower is to be redecorated externally.

Housing works unit painters have been assigned as 'in-house' contractors to complete some redecoration works internally and externally at Loughton Broadway, North Weald Airfield, Museum and the Limes Centre.

Planning permission has now been granted to install new security fencing around the perimeter of Townmead depot to prevent access by unauthorised persons. The surveying team is now seeking quotations for the works.

A planning application is also being drawn up for essential maintenance works to the roof of the listed museum building. When the museum was refurbished it was identified that there was no waterproof membrane below the roofing tiles, so any slippage of a tile could allow water directly into the property and the lead flashings were splitting and are generally life expired. It is proposed to scaffold the premises for safe working at height and then carefully strip off the tiles, installing a breathable waterproof underlay membrane on new battens and then relay the tiles including replacing all broken ones. Lead flashings and abutments are to be renewed and the opportunity is to be taken to provide insulation to roof spaces where possible. Whilst scaffolding is in place, it will also be used to access and overhaul all the chimney stacks.

With the accommodation review ongoing, a careful assessment of all the planned maintenance works proposed for the Civic Offices has now been completed. Much of the services infrastructure around the site is close to life expiry, being 30 years old and careful consideration has been given to what projects can be put on hold in the short term until the review is complete. Quite a few schemes have been held back however, the risks and consequences of this have been mitigated in the short term by increasing maintenance/inspection regimes. At this stage, only projects with a health and safety impact or where there would be a high effect on business continuity will be proceeding.

Technology

The Service Desk team has now filled 2 of its 3 vacant posts and they will be advertising the third post externally shortly. Similarly the newly created Mobile Working and Document Management posts have also been filled within existing budgets. The staff will commence their roles at various dates over the summer and it is pleasing to note the quality of applicants attracted to join ICT from other areas within the Council.

The Service Desk team has been implementing the rollout of new 'thin client' terminals to replace obsolete devices, this includes redundant PCs that have been converted into terminals at the end of their useful lives, saving the Council around £100 per device. The redundant Canon printers have now been returned and secure destruction of their hard drives has been carried out.

Work is now in progress on the creation of the 2018-2023 ICT Strategy and the Business Analysts are engaging with Assistant Directors to ascertain their requirements and aspirations. They plan to bring the draft strategy to Resources Select Committee in the Autumn, ahead of the strategy going to Cabinet in November. Their resources are currently focussing on identifying and planning delivery of tasks that need to be complete to ensure that any changes to working patterns and accommodation can be delivered from an ICT perspective.

The Gazetteer team has recently acquired a Gold status rating, which is the highest rating receiving 99.5% and 99.8% in accuracy from the Geoplace National Hub for the Councils Local Land and Property Gazetteer for the first time. This is despite the team being below strength for almost a year.

Following a recruitment exercise bringing the Gazetteer team back up to full strength, a project to replace our current Gazetteer software is underway, which once complete will enable them to start connecting the Gazetteer to Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) and Electoral Roll systems. This work is crucial for the Corporate Transformation project, as front of house staff answering customer queries will need access to information across the Council, all linked together by the Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN) managed by the Gazetteer.

Furthermore, the Gazetteer team will be taking over responsibility for the Street Naming and Numbering process. This will assist to deliver a cohesive, accurate and efficient process to developers/householders whilst ensuring that legislation and planning covenants are respected throughout.

The Gazetteer team have been working with a new broadband availability dataset and Performance Management systems, making that data available within their mapping solution. They are working with Forward Planning on a mobile data project, where they will

be using the Gazetteer services to collect data and photographs during a number of site visits directly into their mapping system for later reporting and analysis.

Superfast Broadband High Speed Internet

Broadband Delivery

The Rural Challenge Project continues to deliver ultrafast fibre broadband capability to rural houses and business premises throughout the north-east of the district. At the end of June over 3,200 premises had been passed by the network with more than 2,200 now active and able to access the world-class speeds provided by the broadband infrastructure. The network build to date represents in excess of 210 kilometers of fibre infrastructure. It is hoped that building of the final 2 cabinet areas in Hastingwood/North Weald and Ongar will commence in early summer 2017 with completion of the full programme remaining on track for the end of the 2017.

Smart Places

Further work and discussions with partners have been undertaken in order to progress the Smart Places programme of projects that will look to exploit the advanced broadband infrastructure that will be present in the district upon completion of the Rural Challenge Project and the associated Superfast Essex broadband programme. A Digital Strategy, co-funded by the Council, neighbouring local authorities, partners, key local public and private sector organisations is being explored. It is planned that this document would not only be a snapshot of the infrastructure already in place in the district and surrounding areas, but would act as a summary of the current and future strategic co-ordinated needs of the organisations involved as well as the needs of key private sector users, developers and providers. At the meeting on the 15 June, Cabinet endorsed the cross-border, cross-sector collaborative approach and the use of the External Partnership Fund up to maximum of £25,000 to make an additional contribution from the Council towards commissioning this strategy as determined by the level of funding secured from partners. At the same meeting, Cabinet also agreed to the allocation of up to £45,000 from the Epping Forest Economic Opportunities Fund towards the examination of options for the provision of free Town Centre Wi-Fi in some or all of the district's Town Centres.

Portfolio Changes

At the start of the new Council year May 2017 Internal Audit, Corporate Fraud and Legal have been added to my portfolio.

Internal Audit and the Corporate Fraud Team

April 2017 saw the successful creation of the Internal Audit shared service between the host authority Broxbourne, Epping and Harlow Councils.

The team consisting of the Chief Internal Auditor, 3 Senior Auditors and 3 Auditors work across all 3 Councils. This has benefitted all Councils through cost savings and sharing best practice, as well as increasing the resilience of the service. In addition the success of the Internal Audit shared service is paving the way to identify other shared service opportunities.

The Corporate Fraud Team, in collaboration with Internal Audit, has revamped the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy, bringing together a number of fraud related documents including the Council's Anti-Money Laundering Policy, Bribery Policy and Fraud Response Plan.

The fundamental messages contained within the Strategy are the Council will:

- Maintain a culture that will not tolerate fraud or corruption.
- Ensure staff and Members demonstrate the highest standards of honesty and integrity at all times.
- Commit to an Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy that covers the best practice principles of acknowledging and understanding fraud risks, by preventing and deterring fraud and being stronger in pursuing fraud.
- Work in partnership both locally and nationally to tackle fraud and corruption.

The Audit and Governance Committee has considered the strategy and when approved by Council it will be disseminated to staff and Members.

The Corporate Fraud Team continues to go from strength to strength and its successes for 2016/17 included 28 Right to Buy (RTB) applications being stopped and/or withdrawn as a result of investigation team involvement, stopping approximately £2.1 million of potential RTB discount. Other investigations into suspected housing frauds have resulted in the recovery of 16 Council properties which can be re-let to priority cases on the waiting list saving approximately £290,000.

We currently have 2 prosecutions going through the courts which are subject to Proceeds of Crime action. Both cases involve various aspects of Social Housing Fraud and the defendants in both cases currently are subject to restraint orders whereby assets held (such as money, property etc.) cannot be accessed or disposed of without permission of the Court. The cases are due to go to trial in August and October respectively and if convicted, we will be requesting that the Courts grant the Council either confiscation and / or compensation as per The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

We are also currently undertaking a Proceeds of Crime action on behalf of Broxbourne Council (regarding a planning enforcement matter). This is being conducted under the provisions of a Memorandum of Understanding between EFDC and Broxbourne and if successful, EFDC will receive a percentage of whatever monetary award is made by the Court. The next hearing for this matter is in August.

Legal

Langston Road Shopping Park

With the opening date fast approaching, Legal is in the process of receiving for signing and sealing the Agreement for Lease for the Units. Third party notices are also being prepared and signed on behalf of the Council.

House Build Project

In relation to Phase 3 of Council houses being built on surplus land/garages 7 separate contracts were let. Legal have signed/sealed and exchanged 4 of these and are waiting on the Consultant Pellings to produce the final 3 contracts to be signed and sealed.

Arboricultural Maintenance Contract

We are currently in the process of preparing the tendering documents for Ground Maintenance 'tree pruning', which is to be let under a Procurement exercise for 5 +2 years. Brand new Conditions of Contract have been prepared for the new Contract as the current Agreement used is no longer fit for purpose.

Prosecution

At Chelmsford Magistrates Court on 6 July 2017 Mr. Paul Hayden pleaded guilty to cutting down 2 Oak trees and 2 Hawthorn trees and willfully damaging another Hawthorn which were protected by a woodland Tree Preservation Order and are in a Conservation area.

Mr. Hayden had bought the land in late 2006, but as he had occupied it for about 26 years he told his solicitor not to carry out the usual conveyancing searches, which would have revealed that the trees were protected. The trees were cut down to clear a horse ride for his daughter and to avoid horses eating the acorns which he said were poisonous to them.

The Magistrates considered his actions reckless but not for monetary gain. Mr. Hayden's guilty plea was also taken into account and he was fined £400 for each of the trees cut down and £250 for the damaged Hawthorn. Mr. Hayden was ordered to pay the Council's prosecution costs of £1,309 and a Victim Surcharge of £40 making a total of £3,199 Mr. Hayden said: 'He may have to sell the land to pay it'. Mr. Hayden will also have to plant replacement trees.

Scanning of Council Records

The scanning project of the Council's land ownership records and other legal documents are still ongoing and good progress has been made on this. All of the deeds some 919 packets containing multiple documents have been scanned and are available to Legal and Estates Officers.