

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet
Date: 19 December 2023
Subject: Portfolio – Corporate Support Services
Portfolio Holder: Councillor Sam Kane

Recommending:

That the report of the Corporate Support Services Portfolio Holder be noted.

Corporate Services

Corporate Communications

Following its transfer from Customer Services to Corporate Services Directorate on 13 November, the Corporate Communications team continued to provide a full programme of media liaison, social media, website, webcasting and marketing services on behalf of the Council.

The team continued to provide a range of survey and engagement services with practical support on behalf of Planning and Regulatory Services. It also provided support to colleagues working on planning for the elections 2024, the new waste and recycling contract, shared services, and Harlow and Gilston Garden Town.

The team provided specific support for the Latton Priory Design Code consultation in association with Harlow and Gilston Garden Town. It also supported the publication of the North Weald Bassett Masterplan and advice on the forthcoming South of Epping Masterplan public engagement.

Corporate Communications continued to support a range of external partners on joint communications projects ranging from Essex County Council to NHS health initiatives. It is working with colleagues within the Essex Communications Group to provide a consistent message to vulnerable adults and small businesses in the runup to the 'Big Switch-off' when telephone providers retire analogue services.

Communications planning has begun with London Marathon Events and Essex County Council for RideLondon 2024.

Cottis Yard carpark in Epping opened without incident following high volumes of social media comment. Working with Qualis and Places Leisure, the focus of further communications is expected to move towards the start of the new Epping Leisure Centre in Bakers Lane.

Despite the decline of local newspapers, Corporate Communications continues to receive a variety of local, social and national (often tabloid) media enquiries.

Members of the Corporate Communications team received funding to provide communications support on behalf of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Operation Dial, tackling anti-social behaviour in Debden. The team also supported environmental and public health responses in conjunction with planning and regulatory service colleagues.

The team organised or supported a number of civic events including prayers for the victims following the terrorist attacks by Hamas in October, the celebrations for Diwali in November along with the Youth Conference which was held at our Civic Office.

Webcasts September and October 2023

- 9 live meetings totalling 16 hours 33 minutes
- 5 recorded meetings totalling 10 hours 50 minutes

Top 3 viewed:

1. Council 5 October 229 views (220 Public-i + 9 YouTube)
2. Cabinet 18 September (212 Public-i + 14 YouTube)
3. Area Planning Sub-Committee South 11 October (147 Public-i + 7 YouTube)

Social Media

Social media engagement remained steady, with numbers changing only marginally since the last portfolio report.

Social Media Engagement Table

Platform subscribers	August 2023	October 2023
Facebook	4,745	4,793
Instagram	2,524	2,559
Linked In	3,241	3,235
X (Twitter)	9,966	9,968
Mailchimp	1,500	1,542

Social media channels are monitored out of hours on a rota by members of the Corporate Communications team, up to 10pm weekdays and 9pm at weekends. The team also provides monitoring and customer response services on bank holidays including Christmas and the New Year.

People

- **Disability Confident** – We have now been awarded disability confident status level 2 and are working towards a draft self-assessment towards a status level 3 award. We plan on submitting our assessment to Department of Work & Pensions in QTR 1 2024. This work will complement our Equality, Diversity & Inclusion ambition in becoming a fully inclusive employer.
- **iTrent Multifactor Authentication** - All employees (with exception of Casual Workers) have now been moved to MFA method of signing in, and this is being used successfully with minimal issues.
- **2023/24 NJC Pay Award** - Unions have now reached an agreement on the final pay settlement, which has been implemented and applied for our employees. The agreement included a cash award of £1925 on spinal column points up to and including SCP43 and a 3.88% uplift above this. Through our Local Pay

arrangements, we already awarded an uplift of £1200 on each pay point and therefore the difference between the Local Pay award and the NJC award was applied to salary rates and backdated to the 1st April 2023.

- **Standby/Call out payments** - A new proposal has been prepared and recommendations have been given to the Executive and Senior Leadership team to review.

Once reviewed, formal consultation will commence with Unions and effected employees on any changes. This is scheduled to commence in January 2024.

- **Apprenticeships** - Five new Corporate Apprentices are currently being recruited across the Council - Democratic Services/ Elections, (apprentice has been appointed and started employment), Highway Rangers/ Countrycare, Health & Safety (appointment made), Internal Communications (apprentice has been appointed and started employment) and a Paralegal role. The Apprenticeship Levy will be used to train the new Apprentices in specific skills for these areas, thus supporting succession planning.

Business Support

Local Land Charges (LLC), HMLR Project

- Turnaround time approximately 9 working days (target is 10 working days).
- Processes and systems have been reviewed and a business case submitted recommending the introduction of Arcus Land Charges.
- HMLR continue to provide glowing feedback on our performance.

Finance Team

- Testing of Advance Financials commenced.
- Accountspayable have moved into Finance (one Team Manager and five team members).

Business Support Restructure

- Team Manager headcount reduced from 3.6 FTE (April 23) to 2 FTE (November 23). Now there are just two teams in Business Support, supporting the organisation.

Conference Suite

- We have hosted our first three day commercial booking made by Regus.

Business Continuity

- A Wider Leadership Team Business Continuity (BC) tabletop exercise took place 6 December. The aim of the exercise was to promote teams to use their BC plans, learn the importance of communications and recognise areas for improvement. Also, to review their Plans, amending, or identifying where a gap may need to be filled.
- The exercise was led by our Safety, Contingency planning & Business Continuity Officer, supported by two colleagues from another council who have remits for BC who wish to collaborate going forward on how plans and knowledge can be aligned.
- A report on the exercise outcomes will be produced for Senior Leadership Team and a program of ongoing small team and wider team exercises will be discussed

and scheduled over the coming months to ensure compliance and familiarity of individual service BC plans and the overarching Corporate BC plan.

Elections

- The Roydon Parish Council by-election was originally scheduled for 14 December 2023, but no nominations had been received by the closing date. We are now looking to re-schedule this for 1 February 2024.
- The Annual Canvass is almost complete, and the revised register will be published in early December.
- Planning continues for the all-out elections in May 2024. The Count Venue has been confirmed as Chigwell Marquees.

Democratic Services

- Our first Democracy & Elections Apprentice has been appointed to the Team and welcomed by all. This is a positive step and will assist in our succession planning.
- The Member Remuneration Panel met in November and their report is on the agenda for this meeting.
- We held a meeting with Essex County Council to discuss how they operate their Scrutiny function, to see if there are any lessons that we can apply to the District Council

Parking:

Two rapid Electric Vehicle (EV) charging points are now live at Traps Hill car park in Loughton. Epping Forest District Council has partnered again with leading EV charge point supplier, InstaVolt, to install 2 new rapid charging stations in its car park. 1 charging point is an accessible EV bay. It is designed to accommodate Blue Badge holders, larger vehicles and smaller commercial vehicles. The EV charging points will be available 24/7. Existing car park restrictions during operational hours will apply – users should refer to car park tariff boards.

New Telephony System

The new corporate telephony system has been extremely well received with improved call monitoring tools enabling the Contact Centre to make positive changes to call routing, resulting in reduced waiting times for callers.

Community Hub at Civic Offices

Usage of the Community Hub at the Civic Offices continues to increase with October being the busiest month since the Hub opened, with 539 people attending. The Warm Places initiative is a very popular service along with the sessions provided by Barclays Bank, Epping Forest Foodbank, Epping Forest Citizens Advice and digital coaching support.

Out of Hours Provider

As from 1st October the Council has a new call centre provider for “out of hours” emergency calls. The contract was awarded to SPS Doorguard Ltd and Customer Services staff have been extremely impressed with the service received from SPS to date.

Waste Collections

Members will be aware of the situation with the current Waste and Recycling contract and the missed collections experienced by residents in recent months. Call volumes to the Contact Centre are sporadic based on current contractor performance, with 38% of formal complaints relating to waste missed collections. Full KPI information will be reported to the Stronger Council Scrutiny Committee.

Members Induction & Training Relaunch

Staff are in the process of digitalising the forms which Members are required to complete into a single 'Tell Us Once' digital format with the aim of saving valuable time for both Members and officers. It's anticipated that the new form will be ready for testing with Members in early 2024.

Additionally, the creation of interactive e-learning courses via the Council's online training platform, Litmos, is going smoothly. Each course will consist of a knowledge test, a declaration of understanding, and helpful resources including LGA Councillor Guidance Workbooks. Furthermore, any face-to-face training sessions will be recorded and uploaded to Litmos to provide a comprehensive learning pathway for Members.

The timescales for the completion of both strands of this work is March 2024 in readiness for implementation after the May 2024 elections.

Digital Inclusion

The Council has a partnership with Essex County Council and West Essex Community Action Network to bring Wi-Fi connectivity to the communal area of Hyde Mead House, an Independent Living Scheme in Nazeing.

This initiative aims to provide residents with access to digital skills coaching sessions, supporting residents to enhance their knowledge and utilisation of technology and online services. Essex County Council is funding the installation of connectivity and covering the Wi-Fi costs for a 12-month period. It is anticipated that connectivity will be established in early 2024 pending the installation of Fibre by BT. This will serve as a starting point for partners to offer a longer-term tailored range of digital workshops.

Customer Service

With effect from 13th November, the Council's Payment Solutions function has moved into the Finance Directorate and the Corporate Communications Team has moved into the Corporate Support Directorate.

ICT

Matthew White joined the Council on 20 November, as an Interim Head of ICT for Epping Forest District Council and Colchester City Council. Matthew has an in-depth knowledge of all aspects of ICT with many years' experience in local government.

Matthew will be leading with the ICT Strategy, corporate projects, digital services and will be working on the delivery of ICT shared services.

Strategy

EFDC and Colchester City Council continue to explore ways of working together under the shared services umbrella. The Director of Transformation, Melissa Kemp-Salt, continues conversations with Braintree District Council on further opportunities.

Regular meetings are held, to instigate the sharing information and mutual support.

ICT Projects

The following projects have been delivered by ICT:

- Omnichannel Customer Contact Capability (Gamma) as referred to above
- Replacement Housing Asset Management cloud solution (Civica CX)

Priorities for ICT to deliver in the next few months continues:

- Moving to a Software-as-a-Service, for our payments application (Pay360)
- The Corporate Document Management Solution major upgrade
- Museum migration to Trust
- Lone working application replacement
- Freedom of Information application replacement (working with Colchester City Council)
- Requirement gathering for internal room booking application replacement (working with Colchester City Council)
- Delivery a new website platform which can be utilised by Epping and Colchester City Council.

Omnichannel Customer Contact Capability – Gamma / Cirrus Telephony Replacement Project

The project provides a fully managed and hosted contact centre solution with was successfully implemented on 19 October 2023. Over 700 (Direct Dial) numbers were successfully ported to Gamma and assigned.

The solution was considered unfit for purpose when compared to solutions used in other UK Local Authorities and Public Sector organisations. It could not provide informative data analytics or insightful reporting functionality relating to customer engagements.

To support a council fit for the future and enable continuous improvement and development, we have migrated from the legacy Mitel to a cloud-hosted, MS Teams integrated omnichannel customer contact solution provided by Gamma and Cirrus Response.

The new solution provides:

- Supports future collaboration efforts (if chosen) between EFDC and other local authority partners. It's interesting to note Colchester City Council (who we are starting to work closer with) are using the same platform which will opens opportunities to collaborate and on supply management.
- Unifies communications services, which allows customer service agent to manage their telephony directly through MS Teams.

- MS Teams integration supports an increase in operational efficiency and removes the 'additional system log-in requirement' barrier.
- Ability to leverage existing Microsoft Teams licensing to make and receive external calls without requiring additional Microsoft Calling Plan licenses.
- Ability to allow colleagues to remote work and remove the requirement to have handsets on desks/tied to a location.
- 24/7 Microsoft Teams Telephony support through our new partner Gamma.
- A public sector inclusive call package.

New Housing Management Application – Civica CX

- Application is now cloud based and phase 1 successfully went live to 150 internal users on 26 October replacing the Northgate OHM's Application. It was great to see Project Team and users all linking together on first week of the new application.
- Application is operating as expected, with new repairs being raised, tenancies started and ended, arrears actions progressed, and home ownership transactions carried out.
- Phase 2 requirements are being gathered for a business case to be presented to Project Governance for sign off.

PMO Corporate Update

The Project Management Office (PMO) provides governance and project management resources. The PMO has worked with service areas and the Senior Management Team (SMT) to review, align and agree key projects to EFDC's corporate objectives so that time, effort, and money can be directed and supported on the right projects.

Through the collaborative work that has been completed, 11 current projects are agreed as EFDC's 'Corporate Priority Projects' which are strategically aligned to EFDC's Corporate Objectives. Corporate Priority Projects will be reported on a quarterly basis through Overview and Scrutiny as well as being governed through our internal project framework.

The Corporate Priority Projects are:

- Shared Services Programme
- Housing and Asset Management Project (HAM's)
- M3 Replacement Project (Complaints Management, Regulatory Systems & Enforcement)
- Epping Leisure Centre Project
- Future Waste Services Programme
 - o Workstream 1: Future Waste Services Delivery
 - o Workstream 2: Environment Operations Hub
 - o Workstream 3: Procurement of Waste Fleet Vehicles
- Information @ Work Upgrade (Corporate Document Management)
- File Server Data Cleanse (Migration to Cloud based storage and improved data Governance and Compliance)
- Financial Systems Replacement Project
- Improve Security Compliance and Audit (systems logins)
- Infrastructure Architecture (Review of the Council's ICT platforms)
- Automation of manual processes for Revenues & Benefits

The programme management office continues to work to align resources with all Projects to ensure correct prioritisation and the appropriate allocation of resources. This work will help inform the critical path with a view to complete a forward plan.

The PMO is considering new tools, that would provide EFDC with a platform where all our processes, tools, and teams work together to boost teams' alignment, efficiency, and productivity.