

Full Council 23 July 2020

Item 8 Organisational review

Background

In May 2019 a major election shake-up saw 13 wholly-new Councillors out of 15 seats available. The new Members were motivated and established a campaign to take the Council in a new direction including in operational processes as well as in the way the Council interacts with residents. At the Town Council meeting on 18th July 2019 The Mayor addressed members of the public, stating there had been a lot going on in previous days and that Councillors had not inherited a 'ship-shape' Council, but were doing their best to improve things as quickly as possible while being mindful that they were essentially in a 'volunteer' role and Councillors were doing a significant amount of work in their own time under the restrictions of legislation, regulations, policies and procedures.

The new Council radically altered committee structures, and postponed several meetings/decisions. It also resolved to undertake a series of investigations and enquiries about past decisions/matters in order to understand how previous decisions had been arrived at as it was frequently the case that decision-making was not done in public session. This introduced a lot of procedural challenge for the office to address, as well as diverted resources away from day-to-day business matters for the smooth running of the Council, and from projects.

Office operation prior to 2020

Under the previous administration, 3 FTE posts managed day-to-day business, servicing committees and fulfilling statutory duties. The number of "optional" other projects was limited. Staff had each been in post in excess of 10 years, and had operated long-established working practices that included a "silo culture" towards roles/responsibilities. The office had some out of date or missing policies and procedures, a significant amount of manual processing, no central resource or filing system, and no central knowledge repository.

This left the Council at significant risk with regard to business resilience: because of a lack of written procedures or "office manual", all the knowledge of the way the office works was retained by the individual which meant that if staff left, the functionality of the office also left. When the current administration was elected, there were only two permanent, part-time members of staff in post. By the later months of 2019 when most of the senior and long-serving office staff had left, this fragile operational culture resulted in "disaster".

A series of short-term temporary staff in caretaker roles enabled some critical and day-to-day business to continue, but progress on several projects and actions stalled with many resolutions not implemented resulting in a backlog of work. The slow appointment of new staff increased frustration and further reduced resilience.

In November/December 2019 only one part time member of staff remained in the office and the functionality of the Town Council effectively stopped as it is impossible for one person to do the work of 3, but credit to the person for their loyalty and hard work in such a difficult time. The appointment of Aaron Clark accountants stabilised monthly financial management, but the lack of office procedures also hampered their progress. Councillor involvement in some areas including finance, Guildhall bookings, managing external grant funds etc has proved necessary as these matters would otherwise have sunk the authority. However, Councillors undertaking office duties is not best practice.

Summary

No one person, group, action or event has brought the Council to its current position. Instead it is the unprecedented combination of radical change in Councillors, radical change in the Council structure, weak office resilience, catastrophic staff loss, and legacy issues that has resulted in this critical loss in operational efficiency.

Start of recovery

The Town Council sought to appoint new staff and in January 2020 the Town Council Manager (TCM) started. Frequently it is not immediately obvious how/when tasks were previously undertaken, and without handover or manuals it has proved time and again extremely difficult to maintain day-to-day

business efficiently. Upon commencement, there was only a light-touch handover (due to the reasons identified above). The TCM is well qualified and experienced in local government, but is not experienced in Town Council duties and procedures which adds additional pressures at a time when the Town Council requires expertise.

Clearly, since January the Council has functioned at only a skeleton level to meet its minimum statutory functions. Accordingly, the current approach of addressing day-to-day business is keeping the Town Council moving, but is not resulting in the much needed improvement. It is now critical that additional resource is made available to intensively update the office.

Corona Virus Lockdown

The Corona Virus lockdown from 23 March has had a further critical impact on the Town Council. It was thought initially that CV19 would mean a let-up in workload, but actually we just got more and more to do, business-as-usual didn't really stop, existing staff capacity was drastically reduced due to office closure, with additional complexity of inter-office communications frustrated due to lack of established process. A moratorium on staff recruitment meant that much of the recovery actions planned have been delayed, and significant additional tasks were added which distracted from the planned actions. In effect, the Council's recovery has been set back by a further 4+ months.

Workstreams and progress since January 2020

8 broad workstreams have been identified and prioritised in the table below. There is a perceived mismatch between the importance of the workstreams to different groups and the expectations of each clash with the current operational capacity at this stage.

Workstream	Perceived importance			Time spent between Jan-June 2020	Priority going forward
	Public	Councillors	Office		
Servicing committees	Low	Medium	Medium	High	Continued
Statutory duties	Low	Medium	High	High	Continued
Day-to-day business	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Continued
Updating (Discovery, recovery, strategy, efficiency)	Low	Medium	High	High	Significant increase
Legacy / backlog	Medium	High	Low	Low	Increase
Key projects	High	High	Low	Low	Significant increase
Discretionary	High	High	Low	Low	Significant increase
Unexpected works/emergencies	High	High	High	High	Unknown

The new staff structure was agreed in March, and an Administrator was appointed. Work is strong with regard to responding to planning applications, administering community grants, as well as the basic operational functions of a Town Council including cemetery/burials processing, sites maintenance and running the Guildhall. With continued support from existing staff and Aaron Clark, there has been great strides "behind the scenes" in the Council's finances, ensuring end of year processes are completed. The backlog of agendas and minutes has been addressed, and a raft of smaller commitments fulfilled. Progress has been made with BDC on the Hadleigh Vision which is a big step towards securing a plan for the future.

Some higher profile projects are continuing apace, including securing planning permission for the skate park extension, managing grant aided works for Guildhall improvements, and numerous reactions to emergencies such as storm damaged trees, LRSG fire etc. Additional work on communications to raise the profile of the Town Council including social media and website, zoom platform for meetings,

organising functions such as Armed Forces events, Hadleigh Show, Radio Suffolk (sadly ultimately postponed due to CVD19) is gradually increasing the Council's presence across the town.

Other improvements are in train, including increased office security, better secure file storage, reorganising layout to accommodate more staff in the office, upgraded IT hardware and software. Investigations into the Council's contracts, establishing an annual calendar of (statutory) events, planning for meetings into the future and other organisational understanding is underway. All of this positive change has been achieved even without a full-strength office staff resource, but it cannot continue as-is.

Having undertaken this "discovery" work, it is increasingly apparent that the established staff structure will only be effective once the office is organised and efficient. In other words, we can manage the normal workload, but not undertake the necessary recovery work simultaneously or any other project work.

As well as additional capacity overall, the Town Council needs expertise and experience, particularly from an experienced Clerk (preferably CiLCA qualified and time-served). The TCM is training towards this, but the Town Council is currently in such a precarious position and must accelerate acquisition of that knowledge – accordingly recruitment for such a part time position is underway.

The scale of the problem means there needs to be a period of intensive recovery with additional (specialist) support (from consultancy) in order to bring about radical updates and improvements. It is not possible to "shut down" for 2-4 months to focus on recovery and transformation, as day-to-day business does not stop, so additional support is required.

Alternative scenarios

If we do not address the backlog and modernisation of the office, the efficiency of the Town Council will continue to reduce. Reputational damage will result, and confidence in the Council will fall. There will be the risk of further failures.