

Statement by the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Support Services & Economic Development

17 September 2013

ICT Services

ICT Separation Project is progressing to schedule and the contract has been signed for Hambleton's wide area network provision. BT will become the new supplier with installation in November, this will give a network that has greater capacity and resilience and will produce a reduction in existing revenue expenditure. The next major step of the project is to procure the new servers which will enable us to future proof the Council's data storage requirements and provide in-house Disaster Recovery facilities, without relying on third-party hosting.

Cabinet and Management Team have been trialling Apple iPads as part of a project to become paper light whilst improving Member access to Council systems and information. The aim of this project will be the December implementation of a new system for paperless working and committee administration, which will lead to extending the iPad rollout to Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs in the New Year.

The ICT Members Group will continue to run and give an opportunity for Members to contribute to the direction of their ICT support, with Membership currently being revised to take into account changes within the Council.

In addition to these developments I am happy to announce that we are going to employ an additional ICT apprentice.

Revenues & Benefits

Service separation from RDC is progressing well and will be full completed by Christmas. This will enable the Council to concentrate fully on the delivery of a Revenues and Benefits Service to HDC residents. Recently, mainly due to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme there has been a marked increase in the processing times for Benefit claims, this problem is one that has occurred nationally. Using a specific grant allocated to the Council to mitigate this we have outsourced some claims processing which has reduced these times significantly. Further reductions are anticipated as this continues and services are separated from RDC.

Corporate Finance

Building upon the success of the Council's apprenticeship scheme, I am delighted to announce that the Council has appointed its first graduate trainee. Laura Kaye, who is currently employed by the Council as a Customer Services Advisor graduated De Montfort University in 2012 with a first class honours degree in Accounting and Finance. Laura will begin a four year training programme in September to become a member of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy.

Rural Payments Agency

On the 13th August, we were notified that up to three hundred and fifty jobs would be lost from Northallerton due to the announcement of the closure by the Rural Payments Agency of its offices in the town. An additional fifty jobs at Natural England who occupy the same premises are also to be affected. The Council regrets this position, not least due to the impact that it will have on the local economy. This represents a significant loss of regular income into the town, when businesses are working hard to come through a tough economic period.

We have spoken previously to the landlord of the property and we are currently arranging further discussions to explore what can be done to support the occupancy of such a large building close to the town centre. We would be equally pleased to receive any ideas or suggestions from businesses or other organisations that might have an interest in this matter and we are actively pursuing this through our range of business networks. Nobody wants to see buildings in our towns left unoccupied and we will do what we can to bring it back into use once vacated.

Economic Study

We are moving on with pace and purpose in gaining the information and data that will enable us to deliver a robust five to ten year Economic Strategy for our district. The Project Team, comprising our officers, the Chief Operating Officer of the Local Enterprise Partnership and a representative from the Federation of Small Businesses are meeting regularly to deliver the Economic Study. A significant number of Members took part in a workshop on 31st July to discuss the economy and what was needed for it to prosper – these views are important and will be considered as part of the evidence base. Procuring the consultancy input is now well underway, with six submissions for the commission received by the close date of the procurement exercise. The selection process will take place by the end of August and I will update Council as necessary on any further information at the meeting.

Working with the Local Enterprise Partnership

The Local Enterprise Partnership is a key organisation for us to collaborate with to maximise business growth and the economic prosperity of our District. We are working closely with them to shape their Strategy, their priorities for delivery and investment plans. We hosted a workshop on the 28th August at Evolution Business Centre to discuss Infrastructure, Skills and Business Growth. The event was opened up to all District and Parish Councillors as well as businesses across the Hambleton area.

Small Business Saturday

We are now actively engaged across a range of initiatives aimed at supporting small businesses across our District. One such national initiative which is being launched this year is “Small Business Saturday”, promoted through the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. The official date will be on the 7th December and our officers will be working with a range of organisations to celebrate small businesses and encourage communities to support them at a key time in the shopping calendar.

Apprentices

The Council’s project to get more young people into work is continuing to have considerable success. We now have fifteen apprentices working in a range of services across the Council, as well as eight apprentices working in businesses within the private sector. We have not suffered any drop outs from our programme to date. To recognise the excellent work and individual achievements in this area, we have launched an Apprentice of the Year Award – we plan to make this award at Council in December.

Councillor Peter R Wilkinson

Deputy Leader

Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Support Services & Economic Development