



**WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

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Name and date of Committee	Cabinet: Wednesday 15 September 2021
Report Number	Agenda Item No. 8
Subject	Service Performance Report 2021-22 Quarter One
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Suzi Coul, Cabinet Member for Finance Email: suzi.coul@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Giles Hughes, Chief Executive Tel: (01993) 861658 Email: giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	This report provides details of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2021-22 Quarter One (Q1), and enables Councillors to assess operational performance
Annexes	Annex A – Performance Indicator report
Recommendation	That the 2021/22 Q1 service performance be noted
Corporate priorities	<p>Climate Action: Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity</p> <p>Healthy Towns and Villages: Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better wellbeing for everyone</p> <p>A Vibrant District Economy: Securing future economic success through supporting existing local businesses and attracting new businesses to deliver the economic ambitions of the Local Industrial Strategy</p> <p>Strong Local Communities: Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities</p> <p>Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population: Securing the provision of market and affordable housing of a high quality for a wide range of householders making their home in West Oxfordshire</p> <p>Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance: Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council</p>
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No

I. BACKGROUND

Each quarter, the Council monitors its progress towards achieving its aim and priorities, service delivery performance.

2. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK - PERFORMANCE REPORTING

- 2.1. A review of performance indicators is currently underway, and Portfolio Holders are having discussions with relevant managers about priority areas and finding metrics that would be most representative and provide assurance as to how the Council is performing.
- 2.2. During 2020/21, it was noted in the performance report that the 'average time to process Housing Benefit new claims' had become obsolete due to the significant decrease in new claims since the implementation of Universal Credit which was resulting in the average being skewed by a small number of claims taking significant time to process, often caused by external factors such as clients not returning documents. Two new indicators related to the Council Tax Support scheme, which are closely tied to increases in Universal Credit, and are therefore more relevant, have been introduced.
- 2.3. A selection of publicly available benchmarking data for the most recent period at that time (2019-20) was included in the 2020-21 Q4 Performance Indicator report on a trial basis. Some of the 2021-21 data has started to be released with the majority available by the end of December 2021. It is proposed that the benchmarking data is updated and reported on an annual basis.
- 2.4. A high level Commissioning Framework was approved by Cabinet in October 2020 which sets out the relationship between Publica and the Council and their respective responsibilities. Publica must ensure that it provides the necessary information to the Council so it can assess whether the commissioned services are being delivered in accordance with the agreed quality and standard. The Council's Chief Executive is responsible for reviewing and approving the information provided in this report prior to its publication.
- 2.5. The Council's Chief Executive has received a report on service performance, and he has assessed it in line with the high level Commissioning Statement. He has noted the capacity issues and high workloads in some services which have contributed to a reduced level of operational performance in those services in Q1, as well as the actions that are being taken to improve performance. He has also noted the continued impact of Covid-19 on our communities, businesses, and customers as well as staff. He has drawn particular attention to the following:
 - i. In February 2021, the Government set out its 4 stage roadmap out of lockdown with the lifting of all restrictions on 21 June, which was delayed until 19 July. As infection rates have been high over the last few weeks, staff are being encouraged to continue to work from home;
 - ii. There were over 126,000 visits to the Council's leisure facilities in Q1 which is encouraging. Although some outdoor fitness classes re-started on 29 March, the Council's leisure centres re-opened on 12 April (Stage 2), with most activities and classes re-starting on 17 May. Some government grant funding has been made available to cover Council losses from waiving management fees, as well as costs incurred by leisure operators during the lockdown, and to support re-opening;

- iii. A number of services have continued to support businesses to access grants, and carrying out 'test and trace'. Between the November 2020 lockdown and the end of Q1, around £20,344,734 has been distributed in both mandatory and discretionary grants to nearly 1300 businesses across the District. These schemes ended on 30 June 2021, with final payments to be made by the end of July 2021. However, the 'test and trace' work carried out by the Benefits team has been extended to the end of September;
- iv. The Council's business rates collection figure (in year) continues to be affected by the impact of Covid-19 on businesses, as is the case with other councils throughout the country. The Government supported certain businesses with 100% business rate relief last year, but there are still businesses which are struggling financially. At the end of June 2021, the relief was reduced to 66% which will run until the end of the financial year;
- v. It is encouraging to see that the that the operations team has been targeting fly tipping at recycling banks and reminding both residents and businesses about their duty of care to dispose of waste responsibly.

3. SERVICE PERFORMANCE

- 3.1. Over the last two quarters, performance has been mixed but is beginning to show a more positive outlook as we move into Q2.
- 3.2. The nation started to emerge from the third lockdown in March 2021 with the lifting of restrictions over four stages; however, in line with government advice the majority of staff have continued to deliver services from home. This has presented challenges to some services most particularly in respect of the planning service.
- 3.3. In response the service has been piloting a hybrid working solution over recent months which should help improve the efficiency of the service (whilst still respecting social distancing to protect staff). However, the time taken to complete statutory consultations has also created delays due to the working arrangements of consultees. The recent ending of the 'work from home' directive has already started to improve this position.
- 3.4. There are backlogs in some services due to a number of reasons including the suspension of site visits due to the pandemic e.g. Food Safety; as well as backlogs that built up while implementing new systems e.g. Benefits team.
- 3.5. Some services such as Planning and Food Safety have found it difficult to recruit to vacant posts; and turnover in the Customer Service team tends to be high due to staff taking opportunities to progress within the organisation.
- 3.6. The relevant services have commenced further recruitment drives; and the Council has agreed additional resource to increase the number and grading structure of planning officers to better balance workloads and resources.
- 3.7. The Benefits team was able to access some external resources from Civica OnDemand, however, it was not able to secure sufficient resources due to a high demand for the same resources from other councils. Further requests for resources have been made, and the service will be employing temporary staff to help reduce the backlog.
- 3.8. Some of the performance indicators that are falling short of their targets are considered below together with rectifying actions:

- The percentage of calls responded to within 20 seconds and the abandoned rate has increased over the last six months but has started to show improvements in July but still remains short of the target. A review of the customer services indicators to ensure that they are appropriate to customers' needs has concluded that these indicators have become outdated and were based on the 'old ways of working', and more emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring that satisfaction for our services remains high while also taking into account the benefits of channel shift and providing more options for accessing our services.

The service has started work to improve working practices and reduce call waiting time. The manager is also undertaking process benchmarking with other councils which will help us to understand our performance in a wider context.

Performance has fallen over the last six months as workloads are generally higher in Q4 due to normal annual billing processes, combined with staff on long term sick leave and phased return in Q1. We are aware that staffing resilience is an issue, and it is a challenge to maintain sufficient staffing levels due to high turnover as staff take secondments (often not replaced) or other opportunities to progress in the organisation. This means that the service has to undertake regular recruitment exercises; however, it takes around six months to train each advisor with significant support required from experienced staff.

- The average days to process Council Tax Support new claims have increased over the last six months from 20.6 days to 33.1 days, and Council Tax Support changes have increased over the last quarter from 3.5 days to 43.1 days. This was primarily due to high workloads related to the increase in Universal Credit claims since the start of the pandemic, the implementation of the new Benefits system, Covid-19 work, as well as providing welfare support to the most vulnerable residents in the District. The service is managing its workload with support from Civica OnDemand, and has made a request for additional resources from Civica. It is also useful to note that processing times for new claims and changes is not wholly dependent on the actions of the service, and frequently the service needs to wait for information or evidence from either the DWP or the client, which can create lengthy delays in completing the claim or change. An analysis of the data is planned to provide an accurate picture of the 'down time' and to find solutions for addressing any delays for which the service is responsible;
- Similarly, the average days to process Housing Benefit changes of circumstances has also increased over the last quarter from 3.2 days to 26.5 days. Following the implementation of the new Benefits system, there has been a software failure in the facility to automatically upload changes of circumstances and applying them to system records. Around 80% of changes are applied in this way which makes the process much more efficient than manual handling. A software fix has now been applied and the automation reinstated which should be reflected in an improvement in performance in the second half of Q2. A request to Civica for additional resources has been made, and the service will also be using temporary staff to process the simpler cases which will help to reduce the backlog.

3.9. In spite of the challenges this quarter:

- The council tax collection rate appears to have rebounded. The service collected 33.2% of the council tax due in the year compared to 29.4% a year ago.

- The Planning team achieved its targets for planning applications determined within timescales (all three types of application) through careful management of workloads and the effective use of extensions of time.
- Eighty-eight affordable homes were completed; 53 for affordable rent and 35 for shared ownership. The projection for completions remains high throughout the year, despite indications from developers and registered providers that costs are rising, and the availability of labour and materials may become a challenge.

3.10. We are unable to provide the Q1 waste management data. The data team is undertaking a verification exercise of the waste data including the 2020-21 data to ensure that this complex data is consistent between the different sources and outputs.

3.11. A full report is attached at **Annex A**.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN (LGO) ANNUAL REVIEW 2020/21

4.1. The latest Annual Review Letter for West Oxfordshire District Council sets out the complaints that were made against the Council in 2020/21, as well as the outcome of those complaints.

4.2. During the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak, the LGO temporarily paused its casework for three months to allow authorities to concentrate efforts on vital frontline services. In general, this will have reduced the number of complaints the LGO received and decided in the 2020-21, and should be considered when comparing data from previous years.

4.3. In total, the LGO received 11 complaints/enquiries about this Council, which related mostly to Planning and Development (six); the other complaints/enquiries related to Benefits and Tax (three) and Housing (two). In the previous year, the LGO received nine complaints/enquiries, five of which related to Planning and Development.

4.4. Ten decisions were made by the LGO in 2020/21; one complaint was deemed to be invalid, two complaints were closed after initial enquiries; four complaints were referred back to the Council for a local resolution, and three complaints were investigated in detail. Of the three complaints that were investigated in detail by the LGO, one was upheld.

4.5. The complaint that was upheld related to Planning and Development, and concerned the application of separation distances between the complainant's home and a new housing development. The Ombudsman concluded that the usual separation distances were not capable of being met and 'while there is fault here, I cannot say it is more likely than not that the Council would have made a different decision. It is possible, even if the Council had identified the close distances, that it might still have found them acceptable'.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. None

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

6.1. None

7. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

7.1. None

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

8.1. None