



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	Cabinet: Wednesday 15 December 2021
Report Number	Agenda Item No. 10
Subject	Service Performance Report 2021-22 Quarter Two
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Suzi Coul, Cabinet Member for Finance Email: <a href="mailto:suzi.coul@westoxon.gov.uk">suzi.coul@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Accountable officer	Giles Hughes, Chief Executive Tel: (01993) 861658 Email: <a href="mailto:giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk">giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	This report provides details of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2021-22 Quarter Two (Q2)
Annexes	Annex A – Performance Indicator report
Recommendation	That the 2021/22 Q2 service performance be noted
Corporate priorities	Climate Action: Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity Healthy Towns and Villages: Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better wellbeing for everyone 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 Strong Local Communities: Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities 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 Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance: Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No

## I. BACKGROUND

- I.1. The Council monitors service performance each quarter and a report on progress towards achieving the aim and priorities set out in the Corporate Plan is produced at the end of Q2 and Q4. The Q2 update on progress on the priorities will be encompassed within the Annual Monitoring Report and presented to Cabinet in December 2021 followed by the Overview and Scrutiny committees.
- I.2. 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.
- I.3. 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.
- I.4. 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 over the last few months, as well as the actions that are being taken to improve performance. He has drawn particular attention to the following:
  - i. 19 July marked the lifting of all Covid-19 restrictions, and some staff have returned to the office while others are working in a hybrid style in line with Publica's Agile Working Strategy 2020. Whilst we need to ensure that staff are available to deliver services whether in the office or not, the change to more flexible working practices has presented an opportunity to review office space requirements and identify any space that can be repurposed. Draft office layouts have been developed for Woodgreen with proposals for desk layouts, meeting rooms, breakout areas and new tenanted areas. The Chief Executive will be consulting with Members on the proposals shortly;
  - ii. Leisure visits and gym memberships are operating at around 75% and 70% of previous levels respectively. Both Chipping Norton Leisure Centre and Carterton have good membership levels, while Windrush is facing competition from PureGym which is a self-serve 'no frills' gym offer. Furthermore, Witney Lakes Resource has recently invested in a range of leisure facilities including group exercise studios. In response, GLL is revising its marketing and promotions for Witney;
  - iii. Customer satisfaction ratings for services delivered by phone have continued to remain high throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. West Oxfordshire ranked within the top 10 councils on the GovMetric Telephone Channel Satisfaction Index for August 2021. Face to face surveys which only restarted in July are also indicating that satisfaction is high with this channel, although the number surveyed was low due to low footfall;
  - iv. The website satisfaction indicator has been suspended while the service explores other methods for assessing the effectiveness of this communication channel. The Council recognises that it needs to focus on the ability to provide more options for accessing the Council's services including the potential for channel shift to quicker and more cost effective methods of communication where possible, such as the website. The Channel

Choice project has commenced, and processes are beginning to be reviewed in those service areas that receive high volumes of calls.

## 2. SERVICE PERFORMANCE

- 2.1. Performance continues to be mixed for a third consecutive quarter. The main issue has been a lack of capacity due to both high workloads as a result of both internal (improvement work /new systems) and external factors (Covid-19 related, economic, 'stamp duty holiday') and vacant posts in some services.
- 2.2. Additional resources have been secured in particular over the last quarter to support services to reduce the backlog of work, and services are reporting that workloads have become more manageable, although it will take time for performance to improve. In the planning service, there has been a successful recruitment campaign with a total of 20 appointments made across the partnership, many of which are internal, encouraging the retention of a significant number of existing staff. A second round of recruitment has now commenced to complete the consequential vacancies created from the first round and bring the teams up to the new increased resource levels.
- 2.3. Concurrently, improvement work and programmes are on-going. The Planning service has an improvement programme in place which has already delivered significant improvements in the validation of applications, and a service re-designer has commenced work to improve processes in Land Charges. Although it is difficult to resolve the resilience issues in Customer Services, the switch in focus to improving digital take up is expected to reduce call volumes.
- 2.4. Some of the performance indicators that are falling short of their targets and/or indicating a downward trend are considered below together with rectifying actions:

- The percentage of calls responded to within 20 seconds and the abandoned rate has started to show improvements following a decline in performance over the previous six months. Staff in this service are more likely to apply for internal promotions which results in a temporary reduction in capacity.

Resolution: The Customer service team is continuing to recruit to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to deliver the service, however, we need to be mindful that it takes up to six months to train new staff. A review of the customer services indicators to ensure that they are appropriate to customers' needs 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 Channel Choice project has commenced, and the processes in services with high call volumes will start to be reviewed to reduce the need for customer contact and to reduce call length time.

The service is also identifying 'quick wins' to reduce call waiting time, for example, improvements to call waiting messages were implemented in Q2. Callers now receive a tailored message for the service they are calling about that signposts to easier ways to complete the transaction, which will be digital/online in most cases.

- At the end of Q2, both the average days to process Council Tax Support (CTS) new claims and the average days to process CTS changes was similar to the previous quarter at

33.76 days and 44.42 days respectively. The reduced performance over the last few months was primarily due to high workloads related to the increase in Universal Credit claims since the start of the pandemic (with much of the New Claims time delays beyond our control), the implementation of the new benefits system, Covid-19 related work, and supporting the administration of discretionary housing grants to the most vulnerable residents in the District. The backlog of work that was created following the implementation of the new benefits system was exacerbated by a software failure that prevented the automatic upload of changes of circumstances. Although a partial fix was applied nationally, all councils are awaiting a further fix which is expected to be released in November. In the interim, some cases are being processed manually.

Similarly, the average days to process Housing Benefit changes of circumstances remained at a similar level to the previous quarter at 26.21 days.

Resolution: With the injection of additional resources during the quarter, the backlog of work is being managed and reduced. In addition, three experienced temporary staff have either taken up their positions or will do shortly. A recovery plan is in place which should result in an improvement in performance although this will not be notable this year, aided by the software release as well as the soft launch of the open portal in November. The open portal provides a facility for clients to self-serve, which will reduce the burden in the back office.

- Overall, the percentage of 'Other' planning applications (mainly householder applications) determined within timescales has been falling since summer 2020 when the number of applications coming through started to increase in line with the national trend. The increase in demand coincided with a reduction in capacity due to a number of vacant posts which created a backlog of applications awaiting determination. During Q2, the service had four vacant posts.

Resolution: Given the anticipated ongoing nature of increased workloads, the Council agreed to fund an additional two posts to support the team and to provide an improved career structure to support the recruitment and retention of planning staff. In total, five career graded posts have been successfully recruited to, with the majority starting in Q3. The increased capacity over the next few weeks will help to restore performance to previous levels, however, new staff will need to undergo training and the backlog of applications will need to be cleared before this can happen. We expect to see an improvement in performance in Q4. Furthermore, an improvement action plan for the next 12 months is in place across the whole of the Development Management service which is being overseen by both the Group and Business Manager.

- The number of land charge searches increased by over 20% during the 'stamp duty holiday' compared to the five quarters prior to the 'stamp duty holiday', although numbers started to tail off over the last six months. In spite of the increase in searches, in addition to responding to customer queries, performance targets were achieved until the end of Q4 when there was a significant reduction in capacity in the service. An injection of additional resources to support the service and the recruitment of two new posts in Q1 resulted in improved performance in July which the service was unable to sustain as some aspects of the role are more complex and are dealt with by experienced staff.

Resolution: The new starters in the service completed further training in October on the more complex processes which will reduce delay; and the additional resources brought in to support the service in Q1 will remain in place as a temporary measure. Furthermore, a

service re-designer has started to review the land charge search process to identify where improvements can be made especially around the way customers communicate with us.

- The number missed bins per 100,000 scheduled collections increased steeply in Q2 due to a combination of reasons including the fuel shortage as well as positive Covid-19 cases and a shortage of HGV drivers. In addition to fuel refilling limits, Ubico had to use smaller vehicles as there are only three BP (contracted) garages in the District that can be accessed by full size waste vehicles. The smaller vehicles have less capacity and required multiple trips to be made which created a delay in collections, and therefore repeat reports of missed bins. The use of agency staff and crew members who are unfamiliar with the allocated rounds will also have contributed to the increase in the number of misses.

Resolution: The service reports that improvements are already evident with collections back to normal service. The introduction of In-Cab technology on 29 September is expected to improve efficiency in service delivery including reducing the number of misses by providing crew members with assistance to find all of the properties on their particular round.

2.5. In spite of the challenges this quarter:

- Sixty-five affordable homes were completed in Q2; 44 for affordable rent and 21 for shared ownership; and 153 for the first six months of the year against a target of 138.
- The council tax collection rate appears to have rebounded. The service collected 58.6% of the council tax due in the year compared to 57.7% a year ago.
- The Food Safety Team is up to date with high risk inspections which have been prioritised along with new business in line with the Food Safety Agency's recovery plan. The backlog of medium risk inspections is being tackled with the support of additional resources.

2.6. The data team is close to completing the verification exercise on the Council's waste management data and reconciliation with other sources and outputs. The team expects to be able to provide further details including revisions to the waste management indicators to the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2022.

2.7. A full report of service performance is attached at **Annex A**.

### **3. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

3.1. None

### **4. RISK ASSESSMENT**

4.1. None

### **5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

5.1. None

### **6. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

6.1. None