



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	Cabinet: Wednesday 22 June 2022
Report Number	Agenda Item No. 10
Subject	Council Priorities and Service Performance Report 2021-22 Quarter Four
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance Email: dan.levy@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officers	Giles Hughes, Chief Executive Tel: (01993) 861658 Email: giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk Elizabeth Griffiths, Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Finance Officer Tel: (01993) 861188 Email: elizabeth.griffiths@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	This report provides details of the Council's financial and operational performance at the end of 2021-22 Quarter Four (Q4)
Annexes	Annex A – Annual Statement of the Council Plan 2020-24 Annex B – Service Dashboards
Recommendation	That the Annual Statement of the Council Plan and 2021/22 Q4 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.
- I.2. 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, including a range of performance indicators, 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.3. The Council's Chief Executive has received a report on service performance and has assessed it in line with the high level Commissioning Statement. Particular attention has been drawn to the following:
 - i. Following the surge in the Omicron variant in November 2021, the government announced the move back to Plan A on the 19 January 2022; and staff were no longer being asked to work from home and face masks were no longer mandatory. On 24 February 2022, the government confirmed the ending of domestic legal restrictions for Covid-19 including the legal requirement to self-isolate. Staff were reminded to be cautious and retain the good habits learned over the last 20-24 months, especially as infection rates were high.
 - ii. The rising energy prices and higher cost of living is affecting householders, in particular those on low incomes. The Council has started to administer the £150 council tax rebate for homeowners in bands A-D, and those more vulnerable residents in Council Tax bands E to H.
 - iii. The Council's business rates collection figure (in year) continues to be affected by the cumulative impact of Covid-19 on businesses. The Government supported certain businesses with extended retail relief during the year, and the Council recently received £2.27m of Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) to be distributed to those businesses that are not eligible for the extended retail relief but have been affected by Covid-19. In addition, the Council administered 1252 Omicron mandatory grants to businesses (mainly leisure and hospitality) totalling £1,325,051 during Q4;
 - iv. In addition to supporting the Syrian and Afghan Resettlement programmes, the Council is standing with Ukraine. A special email address has been set up as dedicated point of contact to help deal with the volume of enquiries. The Council is supporting the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme in which people in the UK will be able to sponsor/host a Ukrainian individual or family. The Council is working with the County Council to ensure that sponsoring households' properties are inspected and the necessary safeguarding checks are completed; and together with Asylum Welcome, they are providing support for sponsors and guests. Currently, 87 sponsors have been registered in the District.
 - v. One hundred and fifty-six affordable homes reached practical completion in Q4, totalling 378 for the year, well ahead of the target of 274. The success of the Oxfordshire Growth Deal schemes is becoming apparent with 80 homes completed in

Q4 on the Housing 21 affordable extra care scheme at Chipping Norton, and two Cottsway schemes in Carterton and Bampton that have been funded by Growth Deal are expected in the next quarter providing homes at social rent. An additional 17 homes were completed at Cottsway's site at Upavon Way, Carterton, which is part of a larger all-affordable site that is due in Q1 2022/23.

- vi. The Planning team returned to full capacity in Q4 including the two additional posts that the Council approved in August 2021, and is having a positive impact on planning determination times and caseloads.

2. COUNCIL PRIORITIES

2.1. A comprehensive update of progress towards delivery of the Council Plan 2020-24 and Covid-19 Recovery Plan during 2021-22 can be found at **Annex A**. Some of the highlights are presented below:

- The Council's [broadband rollout project with Gigaclear](#) was formally completed in December 2021. WODC and HM Government each invested £1.6m in the project, contracting Gigaclear to connect 4,788 of the most rural premises in West Oxfordshire with Fibre to the Premises broadband. The Council's investment levered a further £6.7m funding from Gigaclear to extend the network resulting in access of a total of over 12,000 properties in the District to ultra-fast broadband as a result of the project.
- The Council successfully bid to Homes England for a 3 year Housing Development and Community Facilitator to enable housing delivery of Salt Cross Garden Village. The post holder is focussing on projects developing community led housing and self-build housing at the Garden Village.
- The Council successfully bid to the government's PropTech fund for £125k to develop a new digital engagement platform that makes readily available information on community infrastructure and developer contributions that exist (or can be created) into a single, accessible and visually engaging repository.
- Four thousand responses have been received from young people across the District to a survey that will inform the West Oxfordshire Youth Needs Assessment. This will inform a comprehensive understanding of the priorities of young people in order to ensure that future services and infrastructure provision meets their needs and that the significant impact on young people in terms of their education, employment options, development opportunities and social skills can be mitigated against.
- Five-year Biodiversity Land Management Plans for twelve Council-owned natural green spaces have been developed, consulted on and subsequently embedded within Ubico's contract renewal 2022 as cost-neutral changes.
- Working in partnership with Cottsway Housing and benefitting from Growth Deal Funding, the Council has worked to enable redevelopment of 49 units for affordable social rent which were no longer fit for purpose at two sites: 18 units at Lavender Place, Bampton and 31 units at Blenheim Court, Carterton.
- An award of £78k from the government's 'Brownfield Land Release Fund' has been made to the Council which will unlock a Council owned site in Chipping Norton for eight affordable net-zero carbon custom built homes. A planning application is forthcoming for the homes and associated sustainable amenities including e-vehicle club with car charging points.

3. SERVICE PERFORMANCE

3.1. During Q4, performance continued to improve in some key areas such as benefits and planning. The Council has previously been made aware of the issues caused by 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) and vacant posts in some services which has affected service delivery during the year. These issues have been addressed by an injection of additional resources, in particular over the last six months to support services to reduce the backlog of work. There are early signs that performance in the Benefits service is returning to more normal levels which should be evident in the next quarter.

3.2. Concurrently, improvement work and programmes are on-going. The Planning service's improvement programme has already delivered significant improvements in the validation of applications, and a new planning checklist, designed to improve the quality of applications submitted, is being created. The launch of the OpenPortal will in time reduce workloads in the Revenues and Benefits service as well as Customer services, as more residents/clients are able to self-serve. In addition, the implementation of In-Cab technology in September 2021 is continuing to reduce the number of missed waste bins, and work to embed the technology is expected to deliver further improvements over the coming months.

3.3. Some of the performance indicators that have fallen short of their targets are considered below together with rectifying actions:

- Processing times for all three Benefit indicators showed significant improvements at the end of Q4. The average days to process Council Tax Support (CTS) new claims improved by six days, while the average days to process changes for CTS and Housing Benefit, improved by 10 days and 8.5 days respectively. The increase in processing times 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. A partial fix was applied nationally, but still required some cases to be processed manually; and was finally resolved in January 2022.

Resolution: Additional resources were brought in during Q3 to deal with the backlog and support the service; and a recovery plan is being developed to improve performance. The OpenPortal was officially launched in January 2022 and clients are now able to start self-serving. Other benefits of the new system are increased automation and better monitoring of workflows and individual workloads which will help the service to actively manage resources and identify any training requirements.

Although it will take time for the system to be fully exploited, the initial signs are promising with performance starting to return to previous levels.

- Both the in-year Council Tax collection rate and Business Rates collection rate continue to be lower than the pre-Covid years. The Council collected 96.3% of council tax due in the

year, one percentage point lower than the previous year; while the in-year business rates collection rate was over one percentage point up on the previous year at 93.4%.

The pausing of recovery action during 2020-21 and waiting for Magistrates courts to re-open for liability order hearings resulted in recovery action only recommencing in August 2021 which will have affected the collection rates. Overall, there are relatively few options available for the recovery of business rates and the process is lengthy, as shown by the extended time taken to recover last year's non payment.

Resolution: Many businesses have been supported by extended retail relief and a range of mandatory and discretionary grants including the Omicron mandatory grant in Q4. Extended retail relief will continue through 2022-23 at a relief of 50%, and for those businesses that are not eligible for extended retail relief and have been impacted by Covid-19, there is £2.27m in Covid-19 additional relief fund (CARF) to support them. A large proportion of these businesses have already been identified although the window for applying will remain open until September 2022. These businesses will have their business rates accounts credited which will help to reduce the debt owed in 2021-22.

Some homeowners will receive a council tax rebate to help with the rising cost of living. This process started in April 2022, and the rebate will be administered via their bank accounts or other means, rather than as a credit on the council tax account.

The service is continuing to support homeowners and businesses; sending out reminders, phoning and emailing to encourage them to contact the Council so that they can be supported via manageable repayment plans, or refer them on to other services both internally and externally. The debt, however, can only be secured through recovery action and issuing of a liability order. There is a dedicated team in place for the recovery of rates who are up to date on cases so all possible steps have been taken.

- The number of missed bins per 100,000 scheduled collections has improved for a second consecutive quarter in spite of some staffing issues related to high rates of Covid-19 infection, and relatively high levels of waste due to home working. Some collection rounds had to be postponed due to Storm Eunice which resulted in some pockets of missed bins when re-scheduled, but the use of In-Cab technology is likely to have reduced the impact (implemented on 29 September).

Resolution: The service reports that the number of missed bins is continuing to reduce, and that crews are fully trained up to use In-Cab technology. However, further work, supported by Ubico Management is being undertaken to embed the system and ensure it is fully utilised so that any training issues can be identified. The new technology 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.

3.4. Some service areas have performed well or are showing improvements including:

- The Council's customers are highly satisfied with services delivered by phone, with over 98% of customers responding positively.
- Through the Council's policies and partnership working, 156 affordable homes reached practical completion in Q4; 97 for affordable rent and 59. In addition to the 80 completed on the Housing 21 scheme, and 17 at Upavon Way, Carterton during the quarter; 12 were completed in East Carterton (Bloor), 10 in West Witney (Persimmon), nine in Burford

Road, Minster Lovell, and seven in Witney Road, Freeland. The forecast for 2022/23 is healthy at 336 completions subject to changes in programme; and no Registered Providers have indicated issues with delivery due to a shortage of materials at this point.

- Overall, planning performance has started to improve. The percentage of applications determined within eight weeks or an agreed timescale achieved its target in March 2022. High workloads in line with the national trend combined with a number of vacant posts had resulted in a lower level of performance. The team has now reached full capacity with all vacant posts filled including two additional posts, which is having a positive impact on officer caseloads, but also reflects the build up of a small backlog of applications awaiting registration/validation. The validation team has already delivered good improvements in the time from receipt to validation, with further improvements expected when the new planning checklist and guidance to applicants to improve the quality of applications submitted, is implemented. Other plans include implementing the next phase of the Enterprise software to improve case management, as well as exploring how customer contact can be improved using customer services 'champions' embedded within the planning service who can also support case officers.
- Residual waste per household has reduced over the last six months with the final lifting of restrictions. Households produced 379 kg each during 2021-22 compared to 405 kg in the previous year but remains higher than the pre-Covid year (369 kg). In order to highlight the importance of reduce and reuse before recycling, the Council has been running a comprehensive communications programme throughout the year which included ensuring that all our leaflets and promotions are up to date and operational changes are communicated widely as well as supporting key national recycling and waste campaigns, including the Waste and Resources Action Programme's (WRAP) Recycling Week last September, and the Food Waste Action Week in March 2022. In addition, the Council is a member of the Oxfordshire Resources and Waste Partnership, and has just embarked on a programme of promoting food waste participation in low performing areas which will be followed up by door knocking at the end of May 2022. Increasing food waste participation is important for the environmental benefits it brings, and will also improve the Council's recycling rate.
- There was a net reduction in Long Term Empty homes over six months, with 170 properties removed from the Long Term Empty list, and 163 added. A three month rolling action plan is in place, and includes tackling some of the complex cases (property on LTE levy, accounts in arrears, and unresponsive owner), and contacting those householders whose properties are about to slip into LTE status or an increased levy.

3.5. The service dashboards are attached at **Annex B**.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. None

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

5.1. None

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

6.1. None

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1. None