



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny committee: Wednesday 28 September 2022
Report Number	Agenda Item No. 9
Subject	Service Performance Report 2022-23 Quarter One
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	All relevant Cabinet Members
Accountable officer	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 operational performance at the end of 2022-23 Quarter One (Q1)
Annexes	Annex A – Service Dashboards
Recommendation	That the 2022/23 Q1 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. On 13 July 2022, Cabinet agreed to revise the Council Plan and develop an Action Plan that will set out how the priorities in the Council Plan will be delivered.
- 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. The rising energy prices and higher cost of living is affecting householders, in particular those on low incomes. Although the Q1 council tax collection rate is not dissimilar to the previous year, it may be impacted by the cost of living crisis as we move through the year. In April 2022, the Council 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. The rebate is not being applied to households' council tax accounts. At the end of June 2022, over 90% of those eligible for the mandatory scheme had received their payments. The Council paid out £3,979,700 to 29,797 households. In addition, the Council has set up a discretionary scheme to help those households who are not eligible for the mandatory scheme. Looking further ahead, the Council is already reviewing the Council Tax Support scheme for the next financial year and has completed modelling on further options for supporting residents;
 - ii. The Council's business rates collection figure (in year) is looking healthy at eight percentage points up on Q1 of the previous year. The collection rate was depressed over the previous two years due to the impact of Covid-19 on businesses. The Government will continue to support certain businesses with extended retail relief at 50% during this financial year. During Q1, £1,955,728 of the £2.27m of Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) was distributed to 922 businesses that were not eligible for the extended retail relief but have been affected by Covid-19. These businesses will have their accounts credited which will help to reduce the debt owed;
 - iii. In addition to supporting the Syrian and Afghan Resettlement programmes, the Council is supporting the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme in which people in the UK are sponsoring/hosting a Ukrainian individual or family. At 30 June 2022 there were 156 sponsor properties registered, 133 of which have received their property inspection. The number of new sponsors signing up for the Homes for Ukraine scheme remains relatively low. Although there were no homeless presentations at the end of June 2022, the need for re-matching guests to new sponsors is increasing. A growing national concern is that many sponsors believed they were only 'signing up' for a six-month period and will require guests to find alternative accommodation after this time;

- iv. Affordable housing completions are well ahead of the target at the end of Q1. The ninety-five affordable homes completed included 17 for social rent at Lavender Place, Bampton which were provided by Cottsway in partnership with Oxfordshire Growth Deal and the Council. The forecast for the rest of the year is positive, with higher delivery forecasted for the first three quarters of the year. We understand that developers are still facing challenges in the procurement and supply chain, however there have been no reported adverse effects on the programmed delivery of affordable housing;
- v. Planning performance is continuing to show improvement. The service's improvement programme is making good progress with a range of projects focussed on improving the quality of applications submitted, improving the way the service communicates with customers, and improving the monitoring of workflows using case management tools to help manage resources. In addition, the planning process (validation to determination) has been reviewed by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and their report on the findings and recommendations for improvement has been received. The next step is to obtain high level endorsement from the Council and for those five recommendations to be implemented.

2. COUNCIL PRIORITIES

- 2.1. Cabinet agreed on 13 July 2022 to revise the Council Plan and develop an Action Plan that will set out how the priorities in the Council Plan will be delivered. A programme of engagement was also agreed which will inform the development on these two documents that will involve three core activities to run through August and September 2022: A public digital consultation, a stakeholder event and an event for Town and Parish Council. A draft Council Plan will be brought to Full Council on 19 October 2022.

3. SERVICE PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

- 3.1. Overall, performance at the end of Q1 appears positive with improvements continuing to be made in some key services such as benefits and planning.
- 3.2. During 2021-22, workloads were high in some services due to the impact of Covid-19 and a shortage of staff. As the nation emerged from the pandemic, the employment market became buoyant with competitive in particular for qualified professional staff. The retention of staff in some services such as customer services, planning, and the waste crew is expected to remain a challenge.
- 3.3. As we progress through the year, some services including revenues and benefits, and housing support are anticipating that the cost of living crisis could impact on workloads and performance. The Council is reviewing the Council Tax Support scheme in preparation for the next financial year, and the potential options for supporting households on low income.
- 3.4. There are a number of improvement programmes in progress across services focussed on improving the way services communicate with customers, increasing automation and self-serve options for customers, and improving the monitoring of workflows using case management tools to help services to actively manage resources.

Key points by service area themes

3.5. Customer services

- The average call wait time in Q1 was relatively high at two minutes and 54 seconds due to high customer contact combined with a shortage of staff. Performance, however, remains within the three minute standard considered good for local authorities (GovMetric). The service supported the roll out of the mandatory £150 council tax /energy rebate to households and the discretionary scheme via a number of channels including telephone, email/electronic and in-person. Advisors provided advice to residents/customers, completed online forms and set up direct debits. Those households which were not on direct debit were required to provide the appropriate documentation which resulted in a higher number of in-person visits to Council offices. Additional resources were allocated to responding to emails. In addition, staff shortage has also contributed to longer average wait times, in particular during the week of the Jubilee bank holidays. Turnover of staff which also includes staff taking opportunities to progress in the organisation impacts on capacity due to the loss of experience.

Resolution: To address the loss of expertise, the training programme has been improved so that new starters complete the core training within a shorter period than previously.

Over the next few weeks, the service will focus on managing demand through improved engagement with other services and fully assessing and understanding the impact of other services' communications with customers/residents on resources in the customer services team throughout the year. This will help to ensure that customer services staff are fully briefed and resources are better managed to meet potential demand. The Channel Choice project, a longer term project, has commenced, and the processes in services with high call volumes are being reviewed to reduce the need for customer contact;

3.6. Revenues and Benefits

- Business rates collection rate achieved its target in Q1, and is around eight percentage points higher than the same period of the previous year. The collection rate was depressed over the previous two years due to the impact of Covid-19 on businesses. Although, the collection rate was looking positive at the end of Q1, we can expect the cost of living crisis to impact on businesses as the economy slows down.
- Processing times for Council Tax Support new claims and changes are close to or on target at 21 days (Target: 20 days) and 3.4 days (Target: 5 days) respectively. The usual small backlog of cases at the end of Q4 arising from end of year processing and the closing down of the system is expected to be cleared by early September. Further improvements are expected in the next quarter;
- The average processing time for Housing Benefit changes has not improved as much as Council Tax Scheme processing times as HB is more complex to process. However, it has begun to return to more normal levels (Actual: 7.7 days, Target: 4 days). Performance in the previous year was affected by a combination of factors including high workloads related to both Covid-19 and the implementation of the new benefits system when the average processing time exceeded 20 days for the majority of the year before improving to just over 14 days at year end.

During the quarter both the Revenues and Benefits teams together with some additional temporary staff were supporting the roll out of the £150 council tax rebate. There is further work over the next few weeks to administer the discretionary scheme.

Resolution: Workloads in the service are being managed and additional temporary staff were brought in to support the Council Tax rebate roll out. The OpenPortal which provides a facility for clients to self-serve was officially launched in January 2022, and is improving the customer journey, and has started to reduce the number of phone calls. Further work is being undertaken by the Customer Experience Improvement Team to ensure that the right systems are in place as well as improving the way the Council communicates with customers, for example via the websites, forms and letters.

- 3.7. The service dashboards that are relevant to the work of this Committee are attached at **Annex A**.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN REVIEW 2021-22

- 4.1. The latest Annual Review Letter for West Oxfordshire District Council sets out the complaints that were made against the Council in 2021/22, as well as the outcome of those complaints
- 4.2. In total, the LGO received seven complaints/enquiries about this Council, which related to Benefits and Tax (three) and Housing (two), Corporate Services (one) and Planning and Development (one). In the previous year, the LGO received 11 complaints/enquiries, six of which related to Planning and Development.
- 4.3. 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 during the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak. This will have reduced the number of complaints the LGO received and decided in the previous year.
- 4.4. Nine decisions were made by the LGO in 2021/22; 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 upheld case was related to Benefits and Tax. The Council was found to be at fault because it issued the complainant with a council tax bill and failed to notify them of their right of appeal to the Valuation Tribunal. The Council agreed to reissue the bill with the relevant appeal information and to update its website and council tax bill letter so it provides information about council tax liability appeals.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. None

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1. None

7. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 7.1. None

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 8.1. None