

 <p>WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL</p>	<p>WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL</p>
<p>Name and date of Committee</p>	<p>Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Wednesday 7 December 2022</p>
<p>Report Number</p>	<p>Agenda Item No. 9</p>
<p>Subject</p>	<p>Service Performance Report 2022-23 Quarter Two</p>
<p>Wards affected</p>	<p>All</p>
<p>Accountable member</p>	<p>All relevant Cabinet Members</p>
<p>Accountable officer</p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Summary/Purpose</p>	<p>This report provides details of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2022-23 Quarter Two (Q2)</p>
<p>Annexes</p>	<p>Annex A – Service Dashboards</p>
<p>Recommendation</p>	<p>That the 2022/23 Q2 service performance be noted</p>
<p>Corporate priorities</p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Key Decision</p>	<p>No</p>
<p>Exempt</p>	<p>No</p>

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. Following consultation with stakeholders, a final draft will be presented to Cabinet on 11 January 2023 before adoption at Full Council on 18 January 2023.
- 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. At the end of Q2, the Council Tax collection rate was similar to previous levels (except 2020-21) but could be impacted as we move through the year. The Council has completed the roll out of the mandatory £150 Council Tax rebate, and the window for applying for the discretionary scheme closed on 2 October 2022. The discretionary scheme is aimed at those who need help most, including people on benefits, people living in shared accommodation and people on a low income that were not eligible for the mandatory scheme. At the end of September 2022, the Council had paid out £4,720,800 to 31,472 households. Looking further ahead, the Council has reviewed and consulted on the Council Tax Support scheme for the next financial year so that more households can be helped to pay their council tax. The proposals were presented to Cabinet in November 2022, and approved for recommendation to Council;
 - ii. The Business Rates collection rate has improved on the previous two years but has not returned to pre-Covid levels. The collection rate was depressed over the previous two years due to the impact of Covid-19. The Government is continuing to support certain businesses with extended retail relief of 50% during this financial year. As part of the Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF), the Council distributed a total of £1,720,503 to 834 businesses that were not eligible for the extended retail relief but have been affected by Covid-19. These businesses have had 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 September 2022 there were 164 sponsor properties registered. The number of new sponsors and guests signing up for the Homes for Ukraine scheme remains relatively low. However, the need to re-match guests to new sponsors continues to rise as relationships break down or the sponsor does not wish to continue in the Homes for Ukraine scheme after six months. A dedicated Ukraine

Housing Support Officer has been recruited and started in October to help with the re-matching, emergency accommodation and move-on advice.

- iv. Affordable housing completions are ahead of the year to date target. The 63 affordable homes completed during the quarter included the completion of Blenheim Court, Carterton scheme that received Growth Deal funding and will offer residents homes at social rent. 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.

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. Following on from the Your Voice Counts consultation which comprised a consultation using the CommonPlace digital platform (running from 24 August to 20 October 2022), a Summit for Town and Parish Councils and Parish Meetings and a Stakeholder Event, five strategic priorities have been identified which will form the emerging West Oxfordshire Council Plan 2023 – 2027:
 - Putting Residents First
 - A Good Quality of Life for All
 - A Better Environment for People and Wildlife
 - Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
 - Working Together for West Oxfordshire
- 2.2. The emerging West Oxfordshire Council Plan 2023 – 27 is due to be received by the three Council Scrutiny Committees on 24 November 2022, 7 and 8 December 2022. A final draft will be presented to Cabinet on 11 January 2023 before adoption at Full Council on 18 January 2023.

3. SERVICE PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

- 3.1. Overall, performance at the end of Q2 appears mixed. The improvements in benefits performance have been maintained, and the council tax collection rate is where we would expect it to be. Business rates collection rate has improved compared to the previous year but is not back to pre-Covid levels. A shortage of staff in customer services and the waste crew has affected some areas of service delivery such as longer average wait times and missed bins.
- 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 increased competition for some staff in particular for qualified professional staff such as planners. 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 has reviewed the Council Tax Support scheme in preparation for the next financial year, and the potential options for supporting more households on low income.

3.4. There are a number of improvement programmes in progress across services including Planning and Revenues and Benefits, and the Waste service, as well as specific actions to return performance to previous levels. Much of the work is 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 Q2 was relatively high at two minutes and 51 seconds, however, performance remains within the three minute standard considered good for local authorities (GovMetric). There was a shortage of staff for the whole of the quarter which included vacant posts and staff on phased return as well as staff undertaking User Acceptance Testing (UAT) in preparation for Salesforce 2.0 'go live' in September 2022, and training. Initial feedback from the advisors on Salesforce 2.0 was positive and should lead to some process efficiency gains.
- Throughout the quarter, advisors supported the roll out of the mandatory and discretionary council tax rebate schemes which also increased footfall into Council offices at Welch Way, as well as responding to waste container delivery queries. Calls relating to council tax bills, the annual electoral canvass (to ensure the electoral register is accurate) and the opening of the expanded council tax rebate scheme in mid-August 2022 combined with some staff sickness and planned annual leave increased the average call wait times during parts of August.
- Advisors continued to support the annual electoral canvass over a 4 week period into September 2022. There was a second spike in call wait times following the mail out of further annual canvass letters.

Resolution: Recruitment to three vacant posts is progressing and improvements in capacity is expected by Q4. However, turnover of staff results in the loss of experience which increases the overall impact on capacity and service delivery.

The service is focusing 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 next step is to promote the process at the next Publica senior managers meeting.

As part of the Channel Choice project, the Customer Experience Improvement programme, and the Revenues and Benefits project, processes in services are being streamlined, and the availability of online services is being increased with further integration of forms to the back office systems which is expected to reduce call length time and the need for customer contact.

3.6. Revenues and Benefits

- Business rates collection rate at the end of Q2 improved by around seven percentage points compared to the same period of the previous year but has not yet returned to pre-Covid levels. The collection rate was depressed over the previous two years due to the

impact of Covid-19. The Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) may have contributed to the improved collection rate as the businesses in receipt of the fund have had their business rates accounts credited. Although the grant relates to 2021-22, the timing of the receipt has meant that some businesses will have used it to offset the current year's account. As we move through the year, the cost of living crisis is expected to impact on businesses as the economy slows down.

- At the end of Q2, the Benefits service has maintained the significant improvements it made since the end of 2021-22 in processing Council Tax Support new claims and changes. The number of CTS new claims is rising due to the cost of living crisis which will also lead to an increase in CTS changes, and therefore, higher workloads.
- The average processing time for Housing Benefit changes has begun to return to more normal levels (Actual: 7.4 days, Target: 4 days) but has not improved as much as Council Tax Scheme processing times. In general, HB is more complex to process than CTS although some changes can be auto-processed contributing to shorter average processing times. However, the number of HB new claims and changes have fallen as claimants transfer to Universal Credit and the opportunity to make gains through auto processing has reduced.

Resolution: The reduction in HB changes some of which used to be auto processed such as the tax credits around August time, is making it harder to achieve the target. The next sets of expected changes to HB claims are pension credit up ratings and new year rent increases from landlords which will be applied during Q4 and should help to bring the average processing days closer to target.

The administration of Housing Benefit is just one aspect of the service and this indicator is part of a larger suite of indicators for the service. Targets for both Council Tax new claims and changes, and % of HB overpayments due to LA error or delay have been achieved or exceeded this quarter. Currently the service is focussing on new CTS claims as the number is rising due to the cost of living crisis.

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

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. None

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

5.1. None

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

6.1. None

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1. None