

 <p>WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL</p>	<p>WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL</p>
<p>Name and date of Committee</p>	<p>CABINET – WEDNESDAY 14 DECEMBER 2022</p>
<p>Report Number</p>	<p>AGENDA ITEM NO 7</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>Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance Email: dan.levy@westoxon.gov.uk</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. Development Management

- A due diligence check of both the Planning dash and PS2 government return identified a system error in the Council's Uniform system which has been corrected. This error has resulted in the determination date [of planning applications] being set incorrectly to add on

extra days for Bank holidays. As Planning officers work to the determination date/target date, some applications have been assessed as 'determined out of time' although officers have actually performed to the standard set.

- The Q2 Planning dash shows two charts to demonstrate the extent of the error. Without the error, planning determination times for 'Minor' and 'Other' applications exceeded 90% during the whole of the quarter. The other chart shows the PS2 return statistics to central government which is created through the Uniform system which includes the error. The error will affect some cases still awaiting determination but is expected to work its way through the system by November 2022 so that the dash and PS2 data will be consistent going forwards.
- The team reached full capacity at the end of 2021/22 including the two additional posts which has had a positive impact on planning determination times, and caseloads have become more manageable. However, the planning team is comprised of some less experienced officers. These officers are receiving training as well as support from the more experienced officers.
- Staff retention remains a challenge due to the national shortage of qualified planners and more employment choice. Two planning officers left the organisation during the latter part of Q2, adding to the two existing vacant enforcement posts. Some enforcement work is being covered by the planning officers as additional work and is not included in the average caseload metrics.
- The average caseload targets were set when the number of applications coming into the service was increasing in line with the national trend which impacted on work allocations and the team structure. These targets need to be reviewed as the number of applications has begun to slow, and the team has reverted back to the intended structure. The proposal is that the caseload targets should be replaced with a range (recommended minimum and maximum) which would reflect current workloads which flex over time. A benchmarking study is underway to inform what these ranges might be.
- There is an improvement programme and roadmap in place. A new Planning Checklist is at the final stages of consultation and revisions. The aim is to improve the quality of the applications submitted and reduce the impact of invalid applications on the validation team. Other improvement projects include the rollout of the next phase of the Enterprise software to improve case management. End to end communication with the customer will be defined in terms of customer touch points i.e. the points at which customers should be contacted during the planning process.

3.7. Housing

- The number of people contacting the Housing Team continues to rise in the wake of the current cost of living crisis, the evolving Homes for Ukraine situation and the approaching cold weather during the Autumn/ Winter period, therefore the pressures on Housing services, systems and pathways remain high.

The Housing Team has refocused more resources on the Prevention approach with the recruitment of specialist Complex Needs officers and also moving people on from emergency accommodation as quickly as possible. The availability of social housing stock however remains low across the District due partially to prevention measures being put in place to assist those affected by the financial implications of the increasing cost of living.

These measures are aimed at working with households to enable them to remain in their own home, with reducing rent arrears or covering the costs of increased bills. Accessing the private rented sector in West Oxfordshire District remains difficult due to affordability.

The use of specialist Temporary Accommodation officers is proving invaluable in this task as they are able to offer dedicated support and bespoke solutions for helping clients move on successfully from emergency accommodation.

Particular attention is now also being paid to the Homes for Ukraine scheme and providing advice and assistance to Ukrainian families who will need to source their own accommodation as the scheme moves through the initial 12 month period. At the end of September 2022, there were 164 sponsors. The Housing Team has been successful in securing funds from our County partner to recruit a specialist Housing Officer to focus solely on this cohort. The specialist Ukraine Housing Officer will work with families and hosts to prevent homelessness wherever possible and assist families to secure their own accommodation in the private sector. Where this is not possible, the Officer will source either rematches to different Hosts through the Homes for Ukraine scheme or source emergency accommodation when needed until a longer term solution can be found.

The Housing Team has also provided targeted provision for rough sleepers as part of its Severe Weather Emergency Protocol response throughout the recent heatwave and will continue to do so during the Autumn/ Winter period. The Housing Team will continue to work with anyone who is new to rough sleeping, regardless of season or weather, to ensure that this is either preventable in the first instance, or where it does occur, that it is brief and non-recurring.

- Through the Council's policies and partnership working, 63 affordable homes (17 affordable rent, 32 social rent and 14 shared ownership) reached practical completion in Q2. Completions in Q2 were slightly lower than anticipated, however, overall, a total of 158 for the year have been completed against a target of 138.

The majority of the homes completed in Q2 were delivered by Cottsway including the completion of Blenheim Court, Carterton scheme that received Growth Deal funding and will offer residents homes at social rent. Further Council funding was used to ensure that the bathrooms were more accessible. Developers have reported material supply problems and recruitment and retention of staff and contractors. The year-end forecasted total is unaffected at this point.

The annual target is based on the current 2018 local plan, which was informed by the 2014 Strategic Housing Market Assessment and more recent evidence. It identifies a need for 274 affordable homes per year.

3.8. 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.

3.9. Waste and environment

- Households produced 12.5% less household waste in the first six months of 2022-23 than the same period of the previous year. Since emerging from the pandemic, all household waste streams (tonnages) have fallen, although residual waste tonnages have generally not reduced as much as other waste streams. However, taking into account the increase in households in the District, residual waste per household has fallen back to pre-Covid levels.
- Between April and September 2022, the combined recycling rate was 58.21% compared to 60.4% in the previous year. The lower combined recycling rate was due primarily to a three percentage point drop in the composting rate as a result of a prolonged period of hot weather and lack of rainfall during the summer months.
- The number of missed bins per 100,000 scheduled collections has improved over the last 12 months. Performance continues to be affected by a shortage of staff caused by illness/absence and challenges securing agency staff in a buoyant employment market, and more frequent vehicle breakdowns as the vehicles move towards end of life. Although staffing returned to full capacity during Q2, the service is focussing efforts on increasing resilience as well as implementing actions to improve delivery of the service.

Resolution: A range of improvement work continues including staff restructure, the transfer of the garden waste team to the depot at Downs Road to improve service

resilience, and 1-2-1 In-Cab support and training to ensure that the capabilities of the new technology are maximised.

There are plans in place to set up a recruitment pool of agency staff who are multi-skilled to both improve resilience and address any potential shortage of staff in the future and the move of the garden waste team to Downs Road will help support this mitigation.

- The Council was having difficulties with obtaining some recycling containers due to delays in the supply chain, which are outside of the Authorities control. These containers have now arrived and deliveries to new builds are being prioritised.
- Fly tips increased during lock down and 'stay at home' messages. Although there was a decline as the nation emerged from the lock down, fly tips may start to increase again as a result of the cost of living crisis and an inability or reluctance to pay for the disposal of both household and business waste.

Cabinet agreed to additional resources in the budget 2022-23 to increase enforcement activities around fly tipping and improving its response to issues raised. The new post holder commenced in mid-September and will undertake a range of reactive and proactive work.

3.10. The service dashboards 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