



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	<b>Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee: Thursday 16 March 2023</b>
Report Number	<b>Agenda Item No. 9</b>
Subject	<b>Service Performance Report 2022-23 Quarter Three</b>
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	All relevant Executive Members
Accountable officer	Giles Hughes, Chief Executive Tel: (01993) 861658 Email: <a href="mailto:giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk">giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk</a> Elizabeth Griffiths, Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Finance Officer Tel: (01993) 861188 Email: <a href="mailto:elizabeth.griffiths@westoxon.gov.uk">elizabeth.griffiths@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	This report provides details of the Council's operational performance at the end of 2022-23 Quarter Three (Q3)
Annexes	Annex A – Service Dashboards
Recommendation	That the 2022/23 Q3 service performance be noted
Corporate priorities	Putting Residents First Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency Working Together for West Oxfordshire
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, the Executive 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 was presented to the Executive on 11 January 2023 and adopted at Full Council on 18 January 2023.
- I.2. A high level Commissioning Framework was approved by the Executive in October 2020 which sets out the relationship between Publica and the Council and their respective responsibilities. Publica 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 Q3, the council tax collection rate was similar to the previous year but could still be impacted as we move into the final quarter of the year. The Council has completed the £150 Council Tax rebate programme. At the end of December 2022, the Council had paid out £5,045,550 (core scheme), and an additional £179,625 (discretionary scheme) to 33,989 households. Looking further ahead, the revised Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme for the next financial year was approved by the Executive and Council in November 2022. There is also an Exceptional Hardship Fund to support those residents who are struggling to pay any remaining council tax following the application and award of CTS.
  - ii. The business rates collection rate improved by around five percentage points on the previous two years but has not returned to pre-Covid levels. Recovery is expected to take longer due to the impact of the cost of living crisis. The government is continuing to support certain businesses with extended retail relief of 50% during this financial year, and will increase to 75% in 2023-24 for leisure and retail businesses. However, the criteria for eligibility is more stringent than during Covid times so some businesses will miss out. The service will be writing to those businesses affected. In addition, some businesses will see their rates increase as a result of the business rates revaluation 2023-24;
  - iii. The Council is continuing to support the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme in which people in the UK are sponsoring/hosting a Ukrainian individual or family. As at 22 December 2022 there were 178 sponsors. Re-matching guests with new sponsors is continuing as relationships break down or the sponsor does not wish to continue in the scheme. Since government increased the monthly sponsor payments to £500, more sponsors have agreed to continue to support their families past the initial 6-month period;
  - iv. Affordable housing completions are ahead of the year to date target (Actual: 234; Target: 207). Working in partnership with housing associations and developers to bring forward more affordable homes will help to alleviate some of the pressures in Housing Support created by the cost of living crisis, the Ukraine situation, and the cold weather. The

Council has received additional Winter Pressures funding to support the increase in homeless cases;

- v. The Executive 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 October 2022 and is undertaking a range of reactive and proactive work. During Q3, 25 fly tips were investigated resulting in six Fixed Penalty Notices.

## **2. COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

- 2.1. The West Oxfordshire Council Plan 2023 – 27 was adopted at Full Council on 18 January 2023. This presents five strategic priorities, of equal importance, for the District:
  - 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. Executive Members will work with Officers to develop an Action Plan that will identify a range of actions to be taken over the next 12 months and beyond to make progress on the delivery of the Council Plan priorities.

## **3. SERVICE PERFORMANCE SUMMARY**

- 3.1. Overall, performance for the quarter appears mixed. Some services including Revenues and Benefits, and Housing Support are reporting increased workloads due to the cost of living crisis which is beginning to impact performance. Consequently some of the improvement that had been made in benefit processing times has slipped in particular for Council Tax Support new claims and Housing Benefit changes, although this was exacerbated by a shortage of staff.
- 3.2. Some areas that have performed well include planning determination times, average time to respond to calls in customer services, and delivery of affordable homes.
- 3.3. The council tax collection rate is where we would expect it to be, and may have been helped by the £150 council tax/energy rebate to some households. Some households will have had their accounts credited if there was no facility to return the rebate. Business rates collection rate has improved compared to the previous two years but is lower than historical levels. We will have to await the end of the year to understand better the impact of Covid Additional Relief Fund payments on the business rates collection rate.
- 3.4. Overall, resource levels appear to be more stable. Some recruitment has taken place in a number of services during the quarter including customer services, benefits and planning with further recruitment expected in these services.
- 3.5. There are a number of improvement programmes in progress across services including Planning and Revenues and Benefits, 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.

### 3.6. Key points by service area themes

#### 3.7. Development Management

- Last quarter, 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 resulted in the determination date [of planning applications] being set incorrectly to add on extra days for Bank holidays thereby understating performance. As Planning officers work to the determination date/target date, some applications were assessed as 'determined out of time' although officers have actually performed to the 'official' standard set. The error has now worked its way through the system (as it can take eight weeks to determine a minor or other planning application) and December's outturn in the Planning dash and PS2 government return are aligned.
- Planning determinations times for 'Minors' and 'Others' are continuing to improve and are some way ahead of the target, and caseloads have become more manageable. The service reports that the number of applications has slowed but still exceeds historical levels in line with the national trend. Overall, staff capacity has improved since the beginning of this financial year, although two planning officers left the organisation during the latter part of Q2, adding to the two existing vacant enforcement posts. During the quarter, one vacant senior officer post was filled (working half time in DM and half time in enforcement); and there was a restructure of the existing team to improve capacity. The remaining vacant DM post will become an enforcement post which will commence in mid-February 2023 which will reduce the need for DM officers to take on enforcement work in addition to their current workloads which is not reflected in the average caseload metrics.
- The average caseload targets were set when the number of applications coming into the service was rising and there was insufficient staff capacity which impacted on work allocations and the team structure, which was further exacerbated by the lack senior case officers. The dashboard style report was introduced a year ago, and the context has since changed. An improved DM dash will be designed for 2023-24 to provide more useful metrics to gauge performance. Some of the proposals are:
  - The introduction of a metric that gives a better reflection of throughput;
  - Caseload targets to be replaced with a range (recommended minimum and maximum) which would reflect current workloads and team structure;
  - The introduction of a trend chart aligned to the indicator that local planning authorities are measured on by the government.

The changes will be agreed with West Oxfordshire District Council.

- There is an improvement programme and roadmap in place. The recent focus has been on clearing the backlog of enforcement cases; and a new Planning Checklist designed to improve the quality of the applications submitted and reduce the impact of invalid applications on the validation team went live on 1 February 2023.

#### 3.8. Housing

- The pressures on Housing services, systems and pathways remain high. The number of people contacting the Housing Team continues to rise due to the cost of living crisis, the evolving Homes for Ukraine situation and the cold weather during December 2022.

The cold weather, along with the cost of living crisis has resulted in some people who would normally be staying between family and friends becoming homeless which has required greater use of hotel placements. Although the Housing Team is able to recover some of the costs of emergency accommodation through claiming housing benefits, the Council loses part of this through subsidy loss. The Council's owned and managed hostels are operating at full capacity.

The Council has received additional Winter Pressures funding to support the increase in homeless cases and resulting pressures on services which is being used for temporary resources to assist with 'moving on' people who were accommodated during the recent severe cold weather. Specialist Temporary Accommodation officers offer dedicated support and bespoke solutions for helping clients move on successfully from emergency accommodation.

The availability of social housing stock 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 specialist Ukraine Housing Officer (funded by the County) is working 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;

- Seventy-six affordable homes (41 affordable rent and 35 shared ownership) reached practical completion in Q3. The affordable housing provision at Shilton Road, Burford has now concluded.

Cottsway negotiated affordable housing on the additional phases at West Witney (additional areas identified by the developers has created additional phases to this development). The first 13 of these homes were completed in Q3. Platform Housing Group has purchased some of the market housing on the West Witney site which will provide additional shared ownership affordable homes; the first two completed in Q3 with a further six forecast for Q4.

Overall, a total of 234 for the year has been completed against a target of 207. Registered Providers report that a number of completions scheduled for Q3 have now been reforecast for Q4 although year end forecast is unaffected at this stage.

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.

3.9. The service dashboards 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