



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	<b>Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny</b> <b>Wednesday 12 April 2023</b>
Report Number	<b>Agenda Item No. 5</b>
Subject	<b>Service Performance Report 2022-23 Quarter Three</b>
Wards affected	All
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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. Portfolio Holders 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. Customer services

- Service delivery can be affected by a range of factors both within the service and in other services. For example, shortage of staff, new systems, how the Council communicates with residents/clients.
- The Customer Services team made a significant improvement in the average time to respond to calls, from two minutes and 51 seconds in the previous quarter to 65 seconds in Q3. A lower volume of calls into the Council (as expected at this time of the year), and recruitment to vacant posts during the quarter contributed to this improvement, although these staff are still training up.
- Retention of staff is an issue and further recruitment is currently taking place as there are leavers in Q4. Furthermore, workloads will be higher in Q4 due to annual billing, garden waste renewals in addition to the introduction of voter ids.
- During the quarter, there were short periods when the average time to respond was elevated, for example, towards the end of October 2022 when call volumes rose following the mail out of CT reminders (delayed by postal strike) which coincided with a shortage of staff. Call volumes continued to fall throughout November and December 2022. The average time to respond increased in the week before Christmas due to a slight elevation in call volumes as the council offices were due to close at 12.30pm on the Friday and more staff on annual leave.
- The service has recently implemented a new process for managing demand through improved engagement with other services. This will mean that communications with residents and customers will be staggered so that workloads are 'smoothed' and can be dealt with more effectively by the team.
- Further work on automation and integration of forms to the back office systems is continuing, aimed at improving the on-line offer for customers and reducing call volumes and call length time. For example during Q3, the bulky waste online form was integrated with Salesforce and a new sign up to waste alerts was introduced which provides information on waste collection days and changes.
- The response time, on call time, and after call time data include data for West Oxfordshire specific staff and share staff, based on a 60%-40% split respectively. The arrangement helps to improve resilience in the service.

#### 3.8. 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.

### 3.9. 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.

### 3.10. Revenues and Benefits

- The Revenues and Benefits service reports that the cost of living crisis has started to increase overall customer contact and workloads in the service.

At the end of Q3, the year to date council tax collection rate was similar to the previous year while the year to date business rates collection rate has improved since emerging from the pandemic but is not back to pre-Covid levels, and is now expected to take longer to recover due to the impact of the cost of living crisis. The service is monitoring insolvencies to understand the impact of the cost of living crisis on businesses. Last year, the Council wrote off £35k in business rates due to insolvency/bankruptcy compared to £63k this year, indicating that more businesses are failing.

On a more positive note, the latest data (at 14 February 2023) indicates that business rates collection rate is continuing to improve at 91.04% (up from 87.9% a year ago), with six further instalments to collect. Council tax collection rate was 95.23% (up from 94.11% a year ago).

The service is continuing to support homeowners and businesses including encouraging customers 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. The service is up to date with in year processes for the recovery of both council tax and business rates. In addition, the Council has asked enforcement agents to put in additional steps during the early stages of debt recovery to help avert court action and higher costs later in the process. The service is also planning to redesign the recovery process during the first six months of 2023-24 with scoping work starting at the end of March 2023.

It was previously reported that there would be fluctuations in business rates outstanding debt during the year caused by Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) payments. There was a significant increase in business rates outstanding debt since the end of Q2 which related primarily to CARF payments applied to 2021-22 accounts. Outstanding debt for 2021-22 is expected to stabilise over the coming months.

- An increase in the number of benefit applications and reduced staffing during the quarter has resulted in longer processing times. The average days to process CTS new claims increased by 2.7 days to 23 days since the end of the previous quarter while the average days to process HB changes increased by one day to 8.4 days. The CTS changes indicator remained comfortably within the target at 3.7 days.

The team has been prioritising new claims as far as possible as these households are likely to be in the greatest needs while also being mindful of the impact of delays to processing changes in particular HB changes. Plans are being implemented to secure and restore/increase resources to deal with increased workloads and improve processing times including the use of overtime and accessing Civica On Demand. Furthermore, £20k from the cost of living associated activities fund has been agreed for additional resources for West Oxfordshire only. It will be used to procure further resources to help the service manage growing demand and reduce the potential impact of delays in processing claims on other services such as Housing Support. These actions are expected to reduce processing times for CTS new claims to be within or close to the 20 day target at the end of Q4, as well as reducing the processing times for HB changes which will also be helped by the auto processing of pension credit up ratings and new year rent increases from landlords which are applied during Q4.

- Workloads are expected to increase during Q4 due to annual billing and the usual end of year activities. Furthermore, both the Revenues and Benefits teams will be implementing the additional £25 payment (as a credit on council tax accounts) to all working age and pension age individuals who are in receipt of Council Tax Support; as well as the alternative energy payments (on behalf of Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) to those households who do not have a direct contract with an energy supplier e.g. park homes and other shared communities, and therefore did not receive the £400 payment.
- The OpenPortal which provides a facility for customers to self-serve their council tax accounts, business rates accounts and benefit claims is being promoted by both Revenues and Benefits service and Customer Services, which should help to reduce customer contact. The annual bills going out in March 2023 will display the link prominently, and further work on improving benefit forms to make them more customer friendly and accessible through the OpenPortal is planned.

### 3.11. Waste and environment

- Households produced 10% less household waste in the first nine months of 2022-23 than the same period of the previous year. Since emerging from the pandemic, all household waste streams (tonnages) have fallen. Composting tonnages, which are largely affected by the weather conditions, has fallen the most, while residual waste tonnages have fallen more slowly but remain 3.5% higher than the pre-Covid year. However, taking into account the increase in households in the District, residual waste per household is falling and is generally lower than pre-Covid levels.

Between April and December 2022, the combined recycling rate was 57.25%, around two percentage points lower than the previous year. The lower combined recycling rate was due to a lower composting rate as a result of a prolonged period of hot weather and lack of rainfall during the summer months. The dry recycling rate and food recycling rate were unchanged.

The Council supported national 'Recycle Week 2022' in October 2022. This year's theme was 'Let's Get Real' and challenged perceptions and myths around recycling, and targeted contamination to improve recycling behaviours; and the Council produced a 'behind the scenes' video for social media showing residents what happens to their recycling once Ubico has collected it. During Q3, there was also a focus on food waste recycling at both Halloween and Christmas as well as other specific messages on recycling and reduction at Christmas time.

- The number of missed bins per 100,000 scheduled collections reduced from 149 in Q2 to 137 in Q3. The number of misses was expected to start falling in Q3 following the implementation of a range of improvement work. However, the extent of the improvement was reduced due to the severe weather conditions in December 2022 which impacted on collections. During the cold spell, collections ran daily and messages to the public went out each afternoon to advise residents to leave their bins out. The crews were able to access most of the District although the Chipping Norton area was inaccessible for some days. The cold weather increased the number of vehicle breakdowns and particularly affected the hydraulics/bin lifts.

During the severe weather conditions, supervisors were out every day to assess the conditions; and the crews did Saturday collections in order to catch up with delayed rounds as well as collect additional waste produced at Christmas time (side waste amnesty). Previous shortages of staff caused by illness/absence and challenges in securing agency staff appear did not present a problem this quarter. The supervisors have improved team working and overall management of the rounds facilitated by In-Cab technology. Crews are now fully trained up in its use.

- The number of fly tips has remained fairly stable over the last few quarters (since falling post Covid-19) and is not showing any indication that they may increase 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.

An additional Environmental Support Officer started in Q3; this post is aimed at tackling environmental crime such as fly tipping. Some of the areas of work being considered include the potential use of surveillance cameras to help with enforcement as well as working with the Neighbourhood Policing teams and Rural Crimes Taskforce to expand the Council's coverage and its ability to clamp down on fly tipping, and keep neighbourhoods clean.

### 3.12. Finance

- Further detail on the Council's financial performance will be provided as a separate item on this agenda.



3.13. 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