



**COTSWOLD**  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 21 March 2023
Subject	Council Priority and Service Performance Report – 2022-23 Quarter Three
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	All relevant Cabinet Members
Accountable officer	Robert Weaver, Chief Executive Email: <a href="mailto:robert.weaver@cotswold.gov.uk">robert.weaver@cotswold.gov.uk</a>
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Summary/Purpose	To provide an update on progress on the Council's priorities and service performance
Annexes	Annex A – Corporate Plan Action Tracker Annex B - Council Priorities report Annex C - Performance indicator report
Recommendation(s)	<i>That the Committee:</i> <i>1. Notes overall progress on the Council priorities and service delivery for 2022-23 Q3</i>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Deliver the highest standard of service</li><li>• Respond to the climate crisis</li><li>• Provide socially rented homes</li><li>• Make our local plan green to the core</li><li>• Support health and wellbeing</li><li>• Enable a vibrant economy</li></ul>
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Publica Directors, Assistant Directors, Business Managers, Service Managers and Service Leads



## **I. BACKGROUND**

- I.1** The Council adopted the Corporate Plan 2020-24 ('the Plan') in September 2020, and included recovery work in response to the impact of Covid-19. A spring 2022 'refresh' of the Plan was completed and approved by Council at its meeting in May 2022. The refresh sought to reflect key achievements since the introduction of the Plan, and clarify the priorities over the remaining period of the Plan (to April 2024).
- I.2** The Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a corporate peer challenge in October 2022. A corporate peer challenge provides for an external review of how a council functions and its ability to deliver on its plans, proposals and ambitions. It is good practice for a council to have a peer challenge every 3 – 4 years (the Council's last peer challenge was undertaken in November 2019). The review is undertaken by a team that is knowledgeable and experienced in local government, and includes both officer and councillor representatives. The team acts as a 'critical friend' and produces feedback that provides a health check and commentary on areas of strength and potential areas for further consideration. Further details are provided at Section 4.
- I.3** A high level commissioning statement was approved by Cabinet in January 2020 which sets out the relationship between Publica and the Council and their respective responsibilities. Publica must ensure that it provides the necessary information 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.4** The Council's Chief Executive has received a report on progress towards achieving the Council's priorities and service performance. Having assessed performance in line with the high level commissioning statement, the Chief Executive has drawn particular attention to the following:
- The Council has appointed a contractor for the Trinity Road office refurbishments. The revised layouts will create space in the West wing to be let to tenants. The first phase of works started in January and will continue throughout February 2023. The Agile project will proceed in a coordinated way with the roof repairs project which is currently out to tender for the main contractor;
  - The rising energy prices and higher cost of living is affecting householders, in particular those on low incomes. Both Cabinet and Council received a report on how the Council is responding to the Cost of Living and Warm Places Motions. Funding allocations for specific initiatives were approved including match funding of £20,000 for the Council Tax Hardship Fund which could be used to provide one-off support in specific financial circumstances, and £40,000 from the Council Priorities Fund towards establishing a food network. Existing external funding of £75,000 which the Council receives for community



based activity has been ringfenced to the 'Cotswold Connected Community and Food Programme'. A councillor led cross party Cost of Living Crisis steering group is meeting every 2 - 3 weeks to oversee progress on assessing what additional support the Council could offer to residents;

- At the end of Q3, the council tax collection rate was nearly one percentage point up on the previous year, but could still be impacted moving 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 £3,830,400 (core scheme), and an additional £135,554 (discretionary scheme) to 26,052 households. Looking ahead, the revised Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme for the next financial year was approved by Cabinet and Council in November 2022. In addition, Cabinet approved the introduction of the Exceptional Hardship Fund in January 2023 to support those residents who are struggling to pay any remaining Council Tax following the application and award of CTS.
- The business rates collection rate is continuing to improve since emerging from the pandemic and was over five and a half percentage points higher than the previous year, although still lower than historical 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 the pandemic 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;
- 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 150 sponsors. Some guests are being re-matched with new sponsors 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;
- Earlier this year, the Council was awarded £1m from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund for the period 2022-23 to 2024-25. The Council's Local Investment Plan, which sets out how the Council proposes to use the funding, was approved by government in December 2022. A further £764,292 was indicatively allocated to the Council from the Rural England Prosperity Fund for financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25. An addendum to the Local Investment Plan was submitted to the government at the end of November 2022;
- Following the decision to retain and enhance the current shared legal service last year, Cadence Innova has been commissioned to support the three partner councils with a detailed service review. Cadence has experience in this field, having undertaken reviews of legal services for Enfield Council and the shared legal service in Gloucestershire (One



Legal representing Tewkesbury BC, Stroud DC, Cheltenham BC and Gloucester City). This commission, whilst ongoing, has already proved invaluable in terms of starting to identify issues and opportunities. One of the observations is the need, for a revised set of key performance indicators for the service, to help monitor performance and service delivery. These will in due course be included as part of the quarterly reports;

- The £380,000 replacement of fitness equipment across the Council's leisure centres has been delivered by SLM Everyone Active (SLM). Initial signs are positive with memberships up by nearly 20% at the end of Q3 compared to a year ago. Rising energy costs continue to be a key issue for leisure operators. The government has announced that the scheme to protect high energy usage companies will not include leisure centres. The risk of high prices will also impact on the Council where a risk share for higher than usual utility tariffs is included in the leisure contract. SLM will continue to raise its concerns with the relevant bodies.

## **2. COUNCIL PRIORITY REPORT**

### **2.1 Progress on actions in the Corporate Plan include:**

- The Council's Local Investment Plan, which sets out how the Council proposes to use the £1m UK Shared Prosperity Fund was approved by the Government in December 2022;
- Following the resolution of technical difficulties, all three phases of the cashless car parking project have been completed. Moving to cashless parking has multiple benefits. It will support the Council's carbon reduction commitment and reduce the costs associated with cash collection and vandalism of pay and display machines;
- Improvement works started at Rissington Road car park, Bourton on the Water in November 2022. The car park requires a new drainage system, resurfacing and layout redesign which will improve the customer experience and comply with industry standards;
- Crowdfund Cotswold continues to attract wide interest across the District. Six projects applied to the Council's 'Autumn Round'. Three projects have already fundraised their target. The Council contributed £26,000 to projects with a further contribution of £10,000 from the Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) resilience fund to eligible projects;
- The Community Wellbeing team in partnership with 'World Jungle' delivered the Holiday Activity and Food programme (HAF) in the Christmas holidays. The offer involved activities from 13 different providers as well as a range of ticketed activities including climbing, cinema, laserquest, ice skating and a visit to Cotswold Wildlife Park;
- Work is progressing on the Changing Places Toilets project (£162,500 award from government). Each of the venues is at a different stage of delivery, with Cotswold Farm



Park being the furthest advanced, having now placed the order with the supplier and the equipment should be installed early in the New Year;

- The Council has secured £137k from GCC for Round 3 of the government funded Household Support Fund for distribution in early 2023. Part of the funding will support families in need with supermarket vouchers as well as registered carers in partnership with Gloucestershire Carers Hub;
- The procurement process for the appointment of Leisure and Culture Management Contractors (2 lots) has commenced. The first stage Standard Selection Questionnaire (SSQ) responses has been completed and the successful bids received an invitation to submit initial tender in mid-October 2022 with a return date of 6 January 2023. Five leisure contractors were invited to bid (one has withdrawn) and two for culture.
- The Council and Bromford Housing have entered into a Collaboration Agreement to deliver the Down Ampney housing development. A planned programme of consultation commenced on 10 October 2022 and will continue through this year, and will help to shape the initial scheme designs for a net carbon zero housing development. The draft Collaboration Agreement was approved by Cabinet at its meeting in November 2022.
- In November 2022, the Government awarded additional funding of £230,000 (together with West Oxfordshire) to further develop and promote digital engagement tools which will be used for further draft local plan consultations
- The A417 Missing Link scheme was approved in November 2022; and Kier Highways has been appointed as the main contractor. The £460m project is designed to reduce congestion and improve road safety on this important link between Cirencester and Gloucester and, more widely, the M4 and M5 motorways

**2.2** An overview of progress against all actions in the Corporate Plan is attached at Annex A and the Council Priority highlight report is attached at Annex B.

### **3. SERVICE PERFORMANCE**

**3.1** Overall performance appears to be mixed. There were improvements in some services such as Planning and Customer services, while other services such as Revenues and Benefits have found it a challenging quarter as they manage the impact of the cost of living crisis. The severe weather conditions in December 2022 affected waste collections, and to a lesser extent high risk food inspections.

**3.2** Over the last year, a number of services have highlighted the potential impact of the cost of living crisis on households, businesses and the Council's services in particular Revenues and Benefits, Planning, Housing Support and Leisure. Some services such as the Revenues and Benefits have reported increased customer contact and workloads while other services such as Planning are reporting a slow-down in applications and potentially fewer applications for large developments due to a loss of confidence in the housing market.



- 3.3** There was an unusually high number of 'Amber' indicators this quarter where performance was close to target. Some targets have been set to be challenging and are exceptionally difficult to meet when numbers are low and then converted into percentages, for example high risk food hygiene inspections and building control satisfaction surveys. There will be a review of targets at the end of the financial year.
- 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 (OpenPortal in Revenues and Benefits and the Channel Choice project), and improving the monitoring of workflows using case management tools to help services to actively manage resources (Enterprise in Planning).
- 3.5** Some of the performance indicators that were short of their targets or showing a downward trend are considered below together with rectifying actions:

- A combination of increased number of claims and change of circumstances and reduced staffing during the quarter has resulted in longer processing times for CTS new claims and HB changes while the average processing days for CTS changes remained comfortably within the target at 3.8 days.

At the end of Q3, the average days to process new CTS claims increased by 3.5 days to 23.5 days; and the average days to process HB changes increased by just under one day to 9.3 days.

The service reports that the cost of living crisis has started to increase overall customer contact and workloads in the service. During the quarter, the Benefits team was down by two full-time experienced officers and another officer left the team in December 2022.

**Resolution:** The team has been prioritising new claims as these households are likely to be in the greatest needs while also being mindful of the impact of delays to processing changes in circumstances, in particular HB changes. At the end of Q3, the percentage of HB overpayment due to LA delay or error was well within the national target of 0.47%.

The team is putting in plans to secure and restore/increase resources to deal with rising workloads, and improve processing times including the use of overtime and accessing Civica On Demand. 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.

The OpenPortal which provides a facility for customers to self-serve is being promoted by both the Revenues and Benefits service and Customer Services and will help to



reduce customer contact. Further work to improve benefit forms to make them more customer friendly and accessible through the OpenPortal is planned;

- Performance for Land Charges searches despatched within 10 working days has dipped again due to a shortage of staff able to complete internal consultee responses in particular in the Planning service.

**Resolution:** An alternative resource was identified to help clear the backlog of planning responses to land charge searches on an overtime basis; and two new recruits joined the Planning Admin Team in January 2023. There are plans to train the whole of the Planning Admin Team in responding to land charge search consultations which will provide resilience across the partnership.

Action is being taken to improve internal consultation turnaround times more generally, including developing a way to better monitor workflows to better understand where the delays are. The Service Lead will highlight any issues or delay in turnaround times to the appropriate Service Manager. This new process will commence formally half way through Q4, and will require time to embed. Performance is expected to start returning to previous high levels from 2023-24 Q1.

- Planning determination times for all types of applications has improved over the last 12 months, with both 'Major' and 'Minor' applications exceeding their targets. Planning determination times for 'Other' applications (mainly householder applications) has also continued to improved but at a slower rate, partly due to being unable to secure extensions of times. This outturn is reported cumulatively from the beginning of the year which means that fluctuations and improvements are flattened. The cumulative outturn to the end of Q3 was 73.8% while the quarterly outturns were 77.4% for Q3, up from 72.6% in Q2 and 71.5% in Q1. Improvements have continued into January 2023 with the target of 80% having been achieved (Actual: 80.52%).

**Resolution:** Performance is expected to continue to improve, although there is an acknowledged backlog of applications which is being worked through so it is possible that there will be some fluctuations. Caseloads have become more manageable. Since the beginning of Q3, the Development Management team has been operating at full capacity following the recruitment to 3.5 Planning Officer posts vacant at the end of the previous financial year. During Covid-19, there was a significant growth in these types of applications. The service reports that the number of applications into the service is slowing but remains above pre-Covid levels in line with the national trend.

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) undertook a review of the Planning service and identified a number of areas for improvement, some of which have already been implemented along with other service improvement projects to improve case management and communication with customers (see 'Deliver our services to the





highest standard' in Annex B Council Priority report). A Cabinet report on Phase 3 PAS recommendations has been prepared which will focus on creating further efficiencies but will require more significant changes in the planning process.

- The number of missed bins per 100,000 increased in Q3 due to the severe weather in December 2022 and the suspension of the service for four days. This type of service failure would not usually be recorded as a 'miss', but the high volume of properties affected by the weather conditions created some technical difficulties with In-Cab. The number of missed bins for October and November 2022 was 64 per 100,000, well within the target.

The target was revised at the beginning of this financial year from an average of 110 to a more stringent 80 missed bins per 100,000 to reflect the successful implementation of In-Cab technology and improved performance.

**Resolution:** The service reports that missed bins performance has returned to previous low levels and that there will be a review and lessons learned session in the next few weeks.

**3.6** In spite of the challenges, there have been a number of areas where indicators have improved or are noteworthy:

- There were improvements in both gym membership and the number of leisure visits in Q3 compared to a year ago. Gym memberships increased by nearly 20% and the number of visits increased by 4.7% (Bourton Leisure was closed for the first two weeks of October 2022). The service reports that there has been a positive start to the New Year with increased interest and usage which is usual for this time of the year, but the rise in cost of living and continued pressure on customers may result in a weaker performance;
- The average call waiting time in Customer Services improved from 2 minutes 20 seconds in Q2 to 57 seconds in Q3. Lower call volumes at this time of the year and recruitment to posts during the quarter contributed to this significant improvement. A process for managing communications with residents and customers was recently implemented which should help to 'smooth' Customer Service workloads throughout the year; while further automation should help to reduce overall call volumes;
- The Food Safety team completed 18 out of 23 high risk food inspections despite a shortage of staff and severe weather conditions in December 2022 which made some properties inaccessible. The remaining inspections have since been completed;
- Eight customer satisfaction surveys for the Building Control service were completed in the quarter, of which seven customers were fully satisfied and one partially satisfied.

**3.7** A full report is attached at Annex C.





## **4. CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE**

**4.1** The Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a corporate peer challenge in October 2022. The corporate peer challenge team gathers information from a wide range of sources and attends various meetings, whilst also conducting interviews with staff, councillors and the Council's partner organisations. The Council's performance is then reviewed in terms of a core set of assessment areas:

- Local priorities and outcomes – are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
- Organisational and place leadership – does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
- Governance and culture – Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
- Financial planning and management – Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
- Capacity for improvement – Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

**4.2** In addition to covering the core assessment areas, the Council requested that the peer challenge team also consider:

- How well equipped the Council is to respond to the challenges and opportunities that are facing local government now and into the future?
- How well does the Council ensure it delivers its ambitions and priorities through its existing partnership arrangements with Publica?

**4.3** A corporate peer challenge forms a key element of sector-led improvement, where the process is designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement thinking. Peers use their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they meet and material they read. The team provides feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors. The team reported that they had been made to feel welcome and had been very well supported throughout the peer review process, and they found those they engaged with to be open and honest.

**4.4** The Peer Review team set out a number of recommendations (the feedback report is available on the council's website) which included identifying that there is scope to undertake more detailed and broader (i.e. beyond the Publica councils) benchmarking and



comparison of service delivery performance with 'nearest neighbour' authorities, that reflect similar geography, size, demographics and deliver services similar to Cotswold District Council. Benchmarking can be incredibly valuable, provided that the data that is being compared against, is truly valid and comparable. As such Publica will be working with council senior officers to undertake a piece of work to develop a broader benchmarking approach. As such it is likely that in due course, future quarterly performance reports will feature more detailed and broader comparisons of service delivery with other councils.

**5. CABINET**

- 5.1 This summary performance report was reviewed by Cabinet at its meeting on 13 March 2023. Any comments from this Committee will be reported to the Cabinet.

**6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications from this report. A quarterly finance report is now a separate item on this agenda.

**7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 None.

**8. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 8.1 Contained in this report.

**9. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

- 9.1 None

**10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 Contained in this report

**11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 11.1 None

(END)