

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Scrutiny Committee – 3rd March 2021

Corporate Performance Report, Quarter 3, 2020/21

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member Ross Henley.

Report Author: Malcolm Riches, Business Intelligence and Performance Manager.

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

This paper provides an update on the council's performance for the first 9 months (April – December) of the 2020/21 financial year. The report includes information for a range of key performance indicators.

2. Recommendations

Councillors are asked to consider the attached performance report.

3. Risk Assessment

Failure to regularly monitor performance could lead to the council not delivering on some of its corporate priorities.

4. Background and Full details of the Report

As part of the Council's commitment to transparency and accountability this report provides an update on performance for a number of key indicators across a range of council services.

4.1 Impact of Covid-19

There has been a continued impact on the work of the Council as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Q1 corporate performance report provided a more detailed update on the specific additional work undertaken by the council between April and July. Many of these tasks have continued and the pandemic has still had a significant impact on the council's activity and workload. In recent months the rapid moves from the second national lockdown in November 2020 through Tiers 2, 3 and 4 and into the current third national lockdown have presented significant challenges in administering things such as the business grant schemes. Further funding has also been provided by Government to support the discretionary element of the Test and Trace payments scheme. Good progress is however being made in quickly distributing grants to eligible businesses. In addition we are diverting resource to provide critical assistance to the NHS in making appointments for the Covid vaccination programme.

4.2 Key Performance Indicators

The table in Appendix 1 includes the councils Key Performance Indicators and shows how the council has performed for the first 9 months of the 2020/21 financial year. The table also includes a “direction of travel” arrow to show whether performance has improved, worsened or stayed the same, since the last corporate performance report which was for the end of September.

For the majority of indicators the target has either been met or, in many cases, has been exceeded. The direction of travel shows that performance has reduced slightly for 9 of the indicators, but the majority of them are still within target. Overall there are 3 ‘Red’ and 2 ‘Amber’ indicators, which are being monitored closely. More information is provided below regarding the red and amber indicators.

For the indicators that were marked as red as the end of Q2 (Complaint and FOI response timescales), monthly figures have been included to show how performance has improved significantly over the last 3 months.

Number of complaints responded to in 10 working days

The performance indicator remains red and below target. Realistically, as the indicator is cumulative, we are likely to remain below target for the remainder of this financial year. In view of the poor performance identified earlier in the year a significant amount of work has been put into both improving response times and identifying changes and improvements to the process. This work is beginning to pay dividends and the monthly trend over the past 3 months shows clear and sustained improvement. A more detailed update is provided in Appendix 2.

Number of FOI requests responded to in 20 working days

Again this has been an area of focus in view of the poor performance identified earlier in the year. However, this indicator also needs to be considered against the backdrop of the Covid crisis and the steer from Government that local authorities could relax their response times to FOI requests in order to focus on immediate Covid related priorities. The figures for the last three months demonstrated continued improvement and for December 2020 were within target. More detail is provided in Appendix 2.

Percentage of Licensing Requests processed within timescales

Despite falling short of the target, the Licensing service have met all statutory obligations. The majority of applications not completed within the target timeframe were made in accordance with the Licensing Act 2003 and received tacit consent; this is where a licence is treated as having been granted if the objection period passes without an objection or the Licensing Authority does not determine the application within a prescribed time period. Tacit consent is something the Licensing service is wary of as it can, in some cases such as caravan site and pavement licensing, result in the granting of a licence without conditions which are required to uphold the principals and objectives of those regimes. This is not the case with applications made in accordance with the Licensing Act 2003, where conditions do apply whether that application receives tacit consent or not.

The delay in completing these Licensing Act 2003 applications was at the end of the process; issuing the licence document following the completion of all initial steps i.e. their being logged on the Licensing back office system, circulation to responsible authorities and determination following the objection period. This was part of a deliberate prioritisation and balancing of work pressures. The backfilling of vacant roles within the team has enabled the service to catch up and clear the bulk of this backlog, with only a small amount remaining. Performance in Q4 is therefore expected to be better.

Business Rates & Council Tax Collection Rates

The cumulative collection rates for both are showing as amber for the end of Q3 because both were below target. The targets shown in Appendix 1 are for the end of year position, but we also track progress against monthly targets. For the end of Q3 the targets and actuals were as detailed below:

	Last Year 31 Dec 19	Actual 31 Dec 20	Shortfall 31 Dec 20
Business Rates	82.57%	80.47%	2.11% (686k)
Council Tax	89.14%	88.24%	0.89% (916k)

Realistically we are unlikely to hit the collection targets for either this year. We have remained surprisingly close to our end of month targets despite the economic impact of the Covid crisis. We have been unable to take any court action for unpaid debts this financial year. We have undertaken limited pre-court action, but this has been impacted by resourcing constraints resulting from the need to process business grants. In addition, we have quite consciously taken a more lenient approach to recovery activity this year in order to try and help both Business Rate and Council Tax payers experiencing difficulty (many for the first time) through the economic impact of the crisis.

The Government's response to Covid has also had a significant impact on the amount of Business Rates actually collectable. At the point of undertaking annual billing in February 2020 we raised a net collectable debit of £60.1m. In March 2020, in response to Covid, Government extended relief to 100% for all small, retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. This had the effect of reducing the collectable debit to £38m and makes a meaningful year-to-year comparison between collection rates difficult.

5. Links to Corporate Strategy

This performance report provides an update on the council's performance which is fundamental to the implementation of the Corporate Strategy.

6. Finance / Resource Implications

The detailed financial position is available in a separate report.

Democratic Path:

- **Scrutiny / Corporate Governance or Audit Committees – Yes**
- **Cabinet/Executive – Yes**
- **Full Council – No**

Reporting Frequency: Once only Ad-hoc Y Quarterly
 Twice-yearly Annually

List of Appendices (delete if not applicable)

Appendix 1	2020/21 Month 9 Performance Indicators Report
Appendix 2	Further information on Complaints and Freedom of Information

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Appendix 2 – Complaints and Freedom of Information

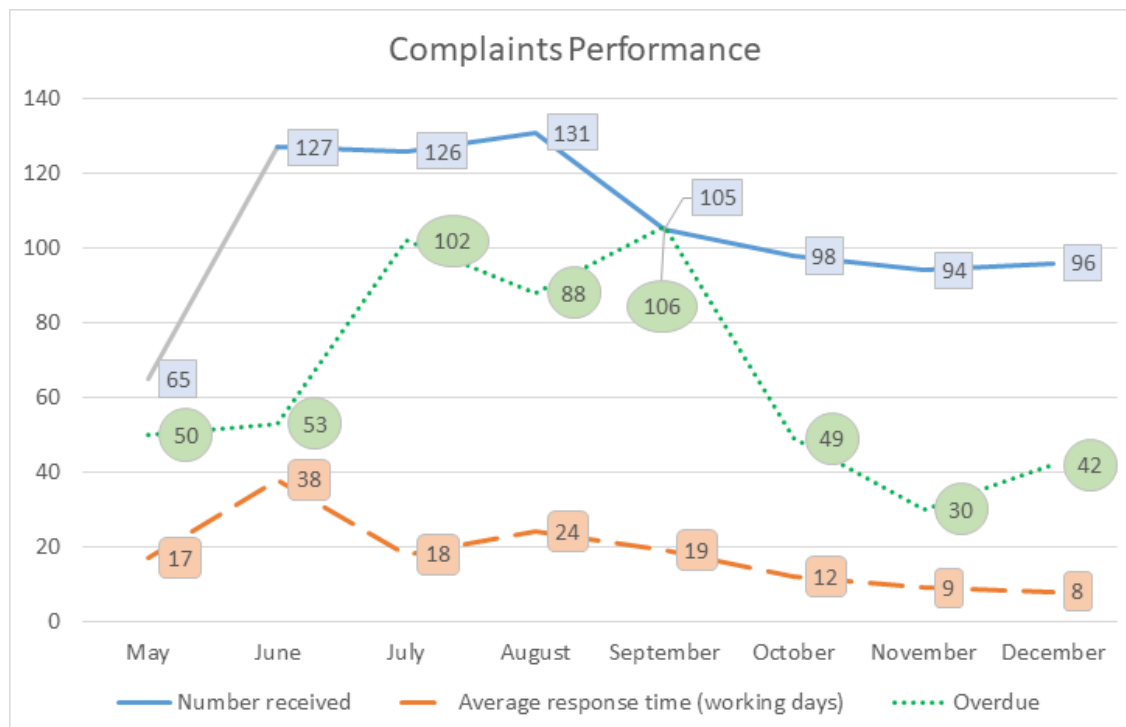
The purpose of this appendix is to provide more background information for Members in relation to the Complaints and Freedom of Information (FOI) Performance Indicators.

1. Complaints

- 1.1. The complaints KPI tracks the number of complaints responded to within the target response time of 10 working days. During quarters 1 and 2 we were significantly below target. Performance during quarter 3 has improved and average response times have dropped back under target.
- 1.2. The indicator is a cumulative measure so the performance in the first half of the year will impact on overall performance across the year as a whole. We saw a significant spike in the overall number of complaints in the first quarter. Realistically therefore this indicator is likely to remain red all year, because, even if we were to answer all complaints within standard from now on, we are unlikely to receive complaints in sufficient volume to make up the lost ground.

Progress tracked by month

- 1.3. Consequently we are tracking progress month-by-month across a wider range of indicators and measures. These measures provide a more detailed and rounded picture of progress.
- 1.4. A summary of these additional month-by-month measures is contained in the graph below:
 - The total number of complaints received;
 - The number overdue (i.e. not responded to within the 10 working day target); and
 - The average time taken to respond.



- 1.5. Analysis of these measures indicates a significant increase in the number of complaints in the period from May through to August. Our average response times increased during this period, which had a knock on detrimental effect on the numbers of overdue complaints.
- 1.6. We believe the increase in complaints is in part seasonal (e.g. garden waste collection issues). It also results from a significant number of complaints in connection with other waste issues resulting from the move to a new service provider during lockdown and delays delivering new bins. We have worked closely with the Waste Partnership and the new service provider to resolve these issues. The level of missed collections and complaints are now greatly reduced, the new contractor is performing within contractual requirements relating to complaints and at a level better than the previous contractor.
- 1.7. The good news is that the numbers of complaints we are receiving has declined sharply, our average processing times have continued to improve (down to 8 days at the end of December) and the numbers of overdue complaints has declined. This is reflective of the increased focus on complaints during the last three months. However, there is still much work to be done.

The Complaints Review

- 1.8. We instigated a review of the complaints process over the summer in view of the poor month 4 (quarter 1) results. This review examined all aspects of the process.
- 1.9. The review identified a number of factors, which were influencing the low performance figures including:
 - The impact of increases in volumes of complaints
 - Cultural factors & a lack of priority being given to complaints
 - Procedural problems and 'log jams'
 - Our not having a two stage process as required by the Housing Ombudsman and preferred by the Local Govt. Ombudsman
 - Software issues with the process and form used
 - A lack of clarity as to which teams do what & consequently where complaints need to be directed to in the organisation leading to delays
 - Training requirements
 - The impact of Covid upon resourcing

The Improvement Plan

- 1.10. The Complaints Review identified actions required to improve our approach to complaints and performance against target. These actions are nearing completion and include:
 - Working with services to prioritise complaints and to change the cultural attitude to complaints
 - Bringing in additional resourcing in the short term to ensure we can quickly finalise and issue responses to complaints once the data is provided by services
 - Developing a new complaints process which:
 - Enables services to respond directly to customers thereby speeding up the response time; and
 - Building in a second stage review process for customers who are unhappy with the initial response – this follows Ombudsman guidelines

- Implementing changes to the complaints software to enable and support the new process
- Providing training & guidance for the staff in services who will be responding to complaints
- These changes free-up the time of the complaints officer to focus more on analysis to identify trends and areas for improvement

1.11. We are in the process of implementing these actions in order to drive improvement. However, as outlined above, there are a significant number of issues that need to be addressed so implementing these changes will not happen overnight.

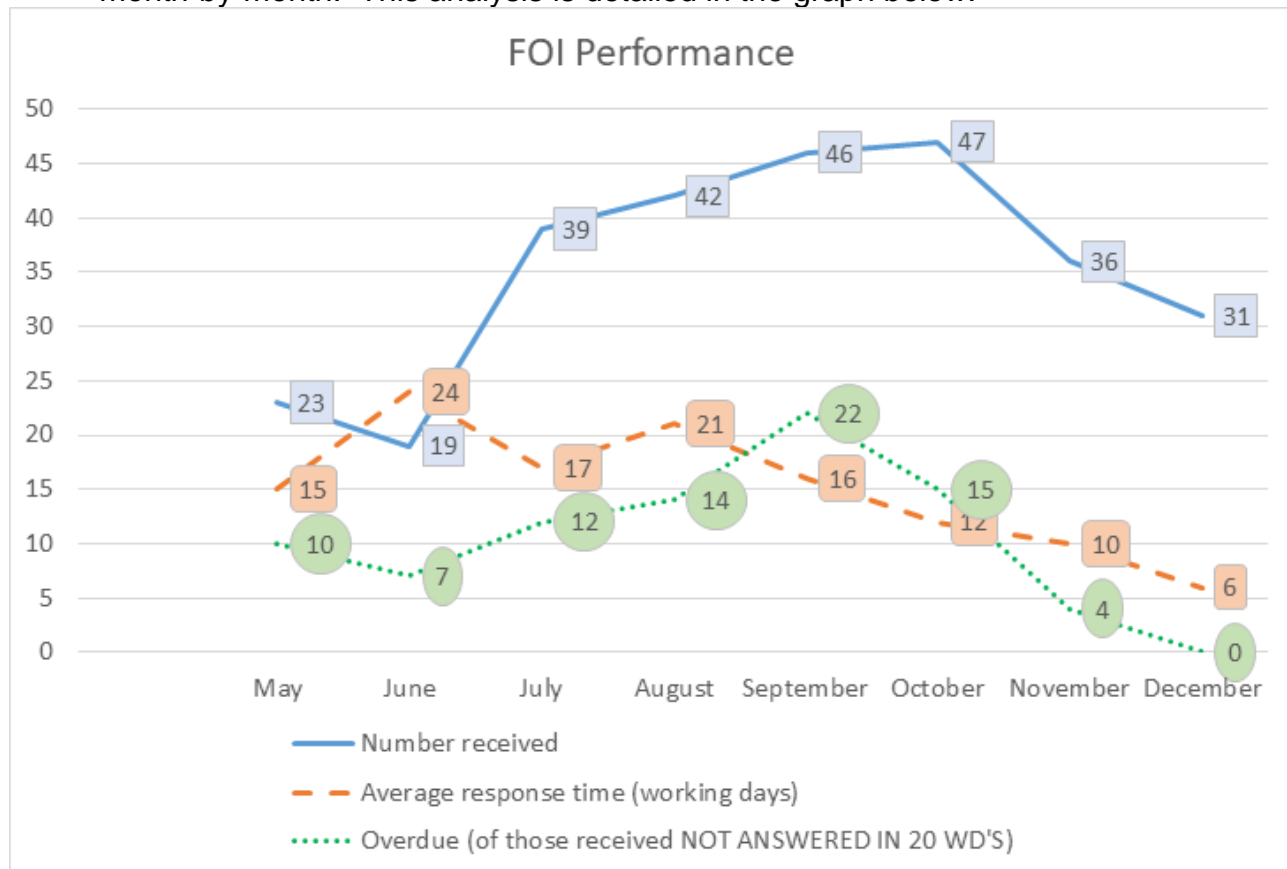
2. Freedom of Information Requests (FOIs)

2.1. We are required by law to respond to Freedom of Information Requests within 20 working days. For very detailed requests we are allowed a further 20 working days.

2.2. The Information Commissioner has relaxed their enforcement of the statutory timescales this year in response to Covid 19 and in recognition that the priority for local government is around assisting in the national response to the crisis.

Progress tracked by month

2.3. We are tracking progress against our performance in responding to FOI requests month-by-month. This analysis is detailed in the graph below:



- 2.4. This graph details the overall number of FOIs received month-by-month and maps this against the numbers overdue (i.e. outside of the 20 working day response timeline) and the average response time in days. Overall volumes per month are low in comparison to the numbers for other service requests, but individual FOIs can be complex and time consuming.
- 2.5. The data on the graph indicates that the number of requests reduced through the first national lockdown in the Spring, but picked up over the course of the Summer. Our average response times were higher throughout the Spring and Summer, which largely reflects the fact that our priorities throughout that period were on Covid response actions.
- 2.6. The numbers of cases overdue peaked in September, but have improved together with our average response times since then. Quarter 3 performance has been excellent with average response times reaching 6 days in December with no requests overdue.

Process improvements

- 2.7. We are keeping our FOI response times under close review and actions are being taken to improve performance. Specifically we are:
 - Regularly contacting services to chase-up responses
 - Providing service managers with a weekly update of outstanding cases
 - Reviewing the computer software process to ensure that requests are being properly targeted
 - Developing training to be rolled out to staff responsible for responding to FOIs.