

Somerset West and Taunton Council Corporate Scrutiny – 7th September 2022

Corporate Performance Report - Quarter 1 2022/23

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member Benet Allen.

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 3 months of the 2022/23 financial year. The report includes information for a range of key performance indicators and includes the key business risks for the council.

Given the breadth of information contained in the report, it is unlikely that all questions can be answered at the meeting. It would be helpful if any detailed questions could be submitted in advance.

2. Recommendations

Members are asked to note the Council's performance report.

3. Risk Assessment

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

4. Background and Full details of the Report

As part of the Councils commitment to transparency and accountability this report provides an update on performance. The Covid pandemic and economic climate continue to have an impact and the Council's response to these issues is being achieved in addition to the regular day-to-day responsibilities. In addition, services are increasingly having to focus on the transition to the new unitary council from 1 April 2023.

Specifically, the report provides:

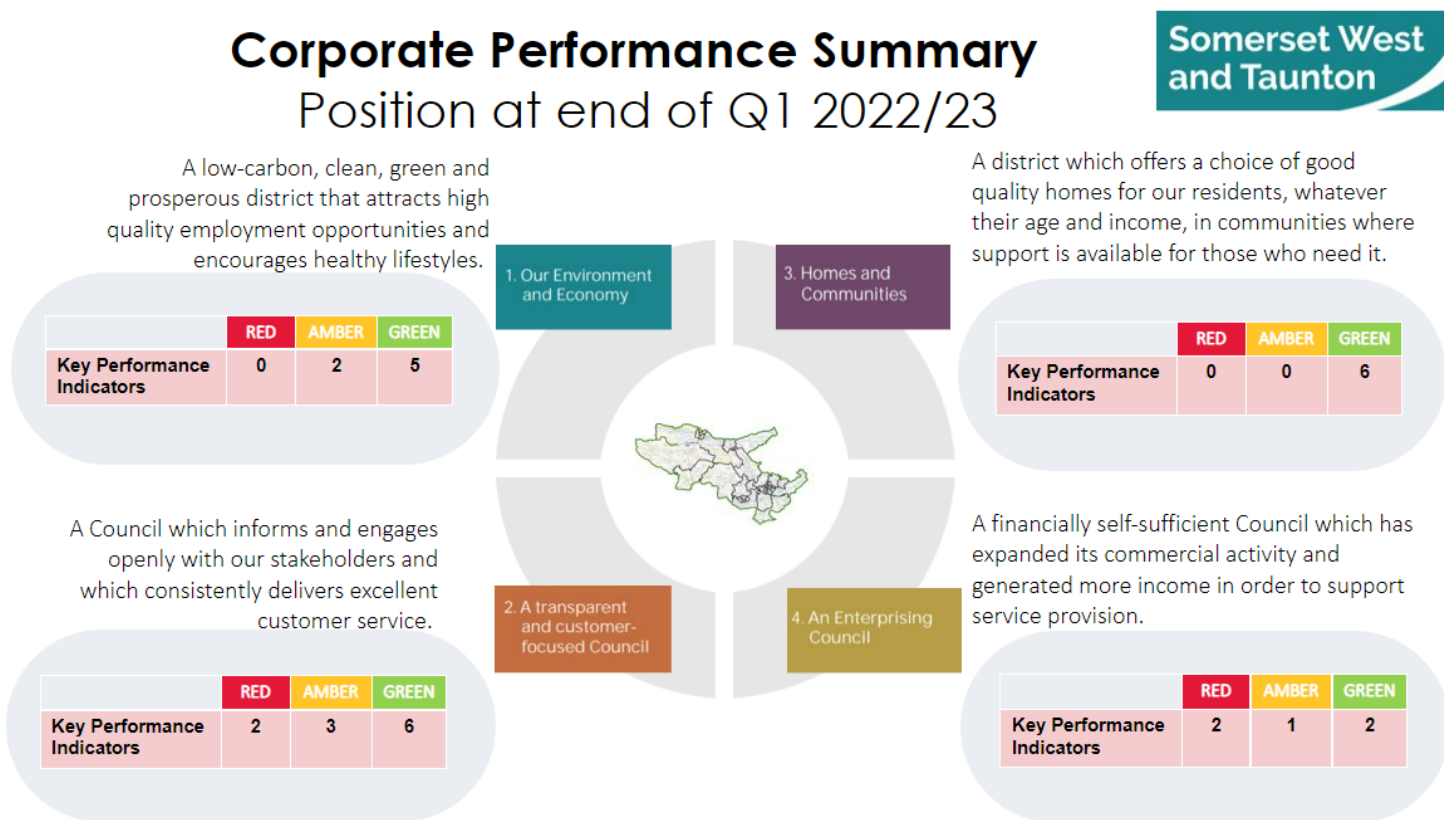
- The position in respect of our key performance indicators at the end of the quarter 1 (30th June).
- A summary of the Council's key business risks and issues together with the current status of the actions being taken to respond to them.

4.1 Summary of Performance

The Council's Corporate Strategy contains four priority strategic themes. Each year the Council produces a plan (the Annual Plan) to identify actions to assist in the delivery of the strategic priorities, and progress for the implementation of the Annual Plan will be reported for the mid-year position at the end of September.

Progress against a range of Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) is reported quarterly. These KPI's are used to monitor progress in delivering key services and to enable us to quickly identify and rectify any problem areas. These indicators are also linked to the corporate priorities to indicate how they support the delivery of the Corporate Strategy.

The graphic below provides an overview of performance for the first 3 months of the 2022/23 financial year for the Key Performance Indicators. Further details are provided in Appendix 1. Of the Key Performance indicators, 19 are Green, 6 are Amber and 4 are Red.



4.2 Key Performance Indicators

The table in Appendix 1 includes the council's Key Performance Indicators and shows how the council has performed during the first 3 months of the 2022/23 financial year. Where appropriate, the table includes a "direction of travel" arrow to show whether performance has improved, worsened, or stayed the same, since the end of March.

For the majority of indicators, the target has either been met or, in many cases, has been exceeded. More information is provided below regarding the red and amber indicators:

Percentage of complaints responded to in 10 working days:

The percentage of complaints responded to in 10 days for the first 3 months of the year is 76%, which is below the target of 90%.

The breakdown of the complaints response times across the Directorates is detailed below:

Directorate	Number of complaints in the quarter	Number of complaints answered in 10 working days	Percentage of complaints answered in 10 working days
Internal Operations	81	73	90
External Operations	61	48	79
Development and Place	11	10	91
Housing and Communities	72	40	55

The reasons for this are varied and are summarised below:

- *Increased numbers of complaints* - the number of complaints received continue to be significantly higher than in the previous financial years. Higher volumes of complaints present challenges in some areas in being able to respond within the target time.
- *Complexity* - we are continuing to receive a greater number of more complex complaints. These take longer to investigate and respond to and often cannot be responded to within target. Where this is the case officers are under instruction to contact the complainant and agree a new realistic deadline for response.
- *Capacity* - the increased volumes and complexity are highlighting capacity problems in some areas around having enough sufficiently skilled officers to respond to complaints. The demands of LGR transition are also having an impact here. In addition, this is particularly of note in areas where vacancies have been difficult to fill, and sickness and holiday periods have led to further capacity reductions.
- *Customer expectations* - customer expectations are increasing resulting in a growth in the number of complaints being registered. This is a sector wide trend across local government. For example, the Housing Ombudsman reported a 230% increase in the number of complaints reported for the period April to June 2021 from the same period in the previous year.

We have and are actively taking steps to improve our performance on response times. These steps include:

- We have trained additional staff within the Customer Services team in the processes for initially triaging complaints and distributing them to the relevant services. This is helping to speed up the process for getting the complaints to the relevant officers.

- Refining and re-writing elements of the IT software (Firmstep) that manages the complaints process to make the routing of complaints easier. These changes have been implemented in the live system and are working as expected.
- Training is ongoing across the organisation to build both capacity and improve the quality of responses to complaints.
- Response times in Housing have been directly affected by extended vacancies in key posts (Case Manager Complaints, Maintenance Manager and Capital Programme Manager), staff sickness as well as leave all of which reduces available capacity to investigate and respond. The response percentage has increased since April to 68% for June 2022. Over 70 staff within the Housing Directorate have received specific complaints training from the Housing Quality Network which has focussed on improving the quality of responses. In addition, all Housing staff have completed refresher customer care training to ensure customers are treated with fairness and respect. The Housing Ombudsman Code self-assessment has been completed (as reported to the Tenants' Strategic Group July 2022) and work towards 100% compliance with the code by October 2022 is underway.
- Learning from complaints and complaint trends are driving new work. In Housing, for example, a working group is looking at damp and mould issues, and deep dive activity is being undertaken with other authorities to compare performance and share good practice.
- Our complaints lead continues to work closely with services to resolve issues and to ensure we can issue responses as quickly as possible. Localised reporting in some directorates has also started in detail, for example weekly follow up on cases within Housing.

We are actively monitoring the workload in this area together with response times and implementing improvements. However, we are conscious that demand will continue to grow particularly in view of the anticipated impact of the fuel price increase, inflation and the worsening economic climate all of which will continue to make this a challenging target.

Average call wait times:

The indicator measures the length of time it takes one of our Customer Services Team to answer a call once the customer has listened to the initial recorded options and selected an appropriate queue.

Our target is to answer all calls within 60 seconds. This is an ambitious target when compared with many other organisations where it is not uncommon to be waiting longer than 5 minutes. There is a clear relationship between the number and length of calls and the levels of staff resourcing required to maintain an answer rate of 60 seconds or below.

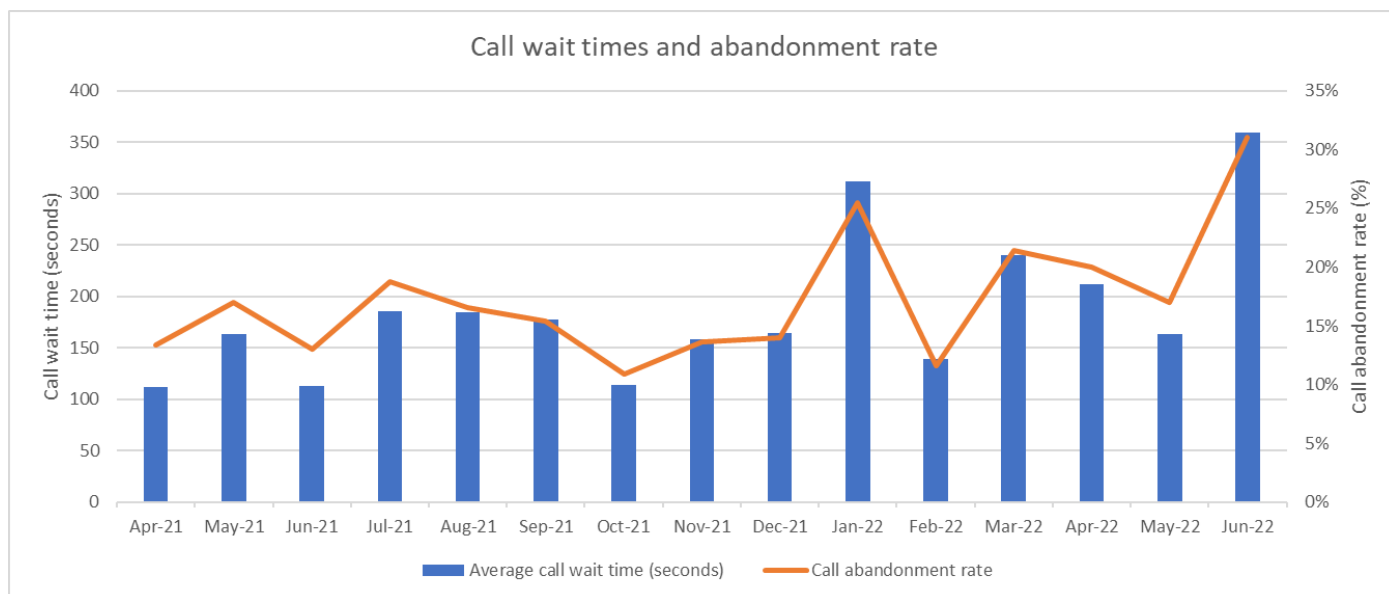
This target has proved extremely challenging over the past year, which has seen increases both in the number of calls we are receiving and the duration of calls. This trend has continued into the current year. During the first quarter of this financial year

we received 60,000 calls, which represented a 5% increase on the same period for the previous year. In addition, the average duration of the calls received during quarter 1 this year has increased by 18%.

The increase in calls is driven:

- In part by business as usual activity (Council Tax bill issue in March 2022 and garden waste renewals), which are tending to generate more calls post-Covid; and
- By the Council Tax Fuel Rebate scheme announced by Government earlier in the year. This affected circa 60,000 properties. The delay between the Government communicating their intention in March 2022 and our actually being able to commence payments coupled with the requirement for a substantial number of people being required to apply for a rebate has inevitably driven up call volumes.

The chart below shows the call wait times and the abandonment rate for the previous year and the first quarter of 2022/23. There is a clear correlation, and it is recognised that when call wait times are longer, the number of people who abandoned their call increases. The spike in January resulted from a post-Christmas increase in calls, which is not uncommon, combined with staff resourcing issues at that time. The spike in June resulted from a combination of increased calls regarding Council Tax Fuel Rebates and garden waste renewals.



Locally we have continued to face resourcing challenges. Turnover within our customer service teams is higher than the average. This is a nationally recognised issue and not unsurprising given the nature of the work and the fact that, in our case, this is very much an entry point into the organisation. However, we are now also experiencing significant difficulties in being able to recruit, which again is a national problem.

In addition, a number of the senior staff within Customer Services are also having to spend increasing amounts of time focussing on the transition of the various elements of the service into the new unitary council. Customer services is one of the critical functions that needs to transition smoothly so this work is vital, but obviously will potentially distract from their ability to focus on immediate operational issues.

Actions have and continue to be taken to improve our call answering capacity and speed. These are summarised below:

- Additional agency staff were recruited to assist with the initial phase of the Council Tax Fuel Rebate enquiries;
- We utilised the services of a specialist external call handling services (Agilisys) to help with the application process;
- Two additional temporary posts are being added to the structure for the remainder of the financial year. The purpose of these posts is to provide additional resilience to help us work through the frequent occurrences of staff turnover; and
- We are currently looking at the backfill requirements to enable the senior staff to fully engage with the unitary transition programme.

The figures for July, whilst still high, are showing a small reduction in the volume of calls when compared to the previous three months. This is probably reflective of the fact that we have completed the Fuel Rebates process. Early indications for August are suggesting this reduction in calls is ongoing, although August is normally a relatively quiet month.

Average processing times of new Housing Benefit claims:

Performance for processing new Housing Benefit claims for the period April to June has averaged 21.82 days, which is worse than the target of 19 days. This results from an increase in workload elsewhere in the Benefits service to which we had to divert resourcing (specifically an increase in Universal Credit work items following annual uplifting) and increased workload resulting from LGR transition activities. In May we recruited a temporary Senior Case Manager whose focus will be on managing and maintaining business as usual service delivery. This enables other senior staff within the team to focus on the LGR transition activities.

The immediate focus for the new manager has been on ensuring the team prioritise those new claims and changes of circumstance where the customer has provided all the evidence and information we need to make a decision. This has resulted in a significant reduction in average processing times for June (20.03 days). The figures for July indicate that we are now processing within target.

Sickness Absence (average days sickness per employee)

Although current performance is rated as Amber, the target of 7.2 days sickness per employee for the year is aspirational and ambitious yet is very nearly being reached. Particularly given the make up of our workforce which includes a reasonable proportion of manual work. The unprecedented impact of the pandemic on working patterns over recent years has made it more challenging to set meaningful targets for sickness due to the issues with looking at trends in data from previous years. In 2021/22, this target was met, which was a significant achievement given that levels of sickness in previous years had been much higher.

Undoubtedly home working is a positive factor in reducing sickness absence. We are very close to achieving this target again, and based on Q1 performance, the forecast

for the year would be 7.6 days. Sickness data is closely monitored by Directorate management teams on a monthly basis and will be kept under review.

Staff Turnover

The target for the year is to be under 12%, which is very aspirational, and is very close to being met. The Q1 performance is 3.31, suggesting a forecast for the year of 13.2. While not giving cause for concern at this stage, the data is monitored by Directorate management teams on a monthly basis and will be kept under review.

Risks to increased turnover include;

- The Local Authority sector is rapidly losing pace on pay with other employers. Whilst historically an increased salary is an outcome rather than a driver of job change. The current economic climate is likely to drive behaviour as employees feel the impact of inflation.
- Other employers (including the NHS) matching the flexibility that was previously a key selling point for Local Authorities.
- Post pandemic, employers are far more relaxed about staff living a considerable distance from their work base. This has resulted in employees moving to jobs with London salaries yet remaining in Somerset.
- There is some evidence of employees moving between districts to maximise their income. Indeed, one authority is offering incentives to planning staff to move to them.
- Job security related to LGR is a factor and this risk will heighten when news of the size of the MTFP gap becomes more widely known.

% of planning appeals that have had the decision overturned:

The number of planning appeals is generally low (there have been 40 in the past 12 months) which is why the indicator looks at performance over the past 12 months. Because of the low numbers, it only takes a few appeals to have a big impact on the percentage. Of the 40 appeals, 16 have had the decision overturned by the Planning Inspectorate. During Quarter 1 of 2022/23, 5 appeal decisions were received. Of these, 1 decision (20%) was overturned which is below the target of 33%.

% of other planning applications determined within 8 weeks or an agreed extension of time:

Performance for March to June has been 75% which is lower than the target of 80%. This is due to workloads, staff sickness, vacant posts and the lack of extensions of time agreed.

***Forecast budget variance for General Fund,
Forecast budget variance for Housing Revenue Account,
Forecast level of reserves for Housing Revenue Account.***

Detailed commentary for these indicators is provided in the finance reports.

4.3 Risk Management update

The quarterly Corporate Performance Reports include an update on the key business risks and issues for the Council.

Processes are in place within each directorate to regularly review existing and identify any new risks and issues. As new risks or issues are identified they are included on the risk register or issues log and mitigations are identified and planned. A target date is set as to when the mitigations should be in place, and a lead officer is appointed.

The risks are all scored based on their probability and potential impact. The Risk Scoring Matrix used to score the risks is attached at Appendix 2. Risks with a higher score are likely to have a more detailed mitigation plan. Issues are things which have already happened, so they are not scored in the same way as risks, but they have a RAG status which relates to the severity of the issue.

As of the end of June there were 5 Key Business Risks (with a score of 15 or higher) on the risk register which are shown in Appendix 3.

As of the end of June the Corporate Issues Log contained 2 Issues which are shown in Appendix 4.

Appendices 3 and 4 provide a summary of the key risk or issue together with the current status of the development and delivery of any mitigation plans required to address them.

The risk register and issues log are updated as necessary and new risks/issues can be added at any point. They are routinely reviewed each month through the regular cycle of meetings. The lead officer is responsible for updating the risk register with progress made regarding mitigations, and this is reported back to Directorate performance meetings, and to the Corporate Performance Board where SMT review the key risks monthly

5. Links to Corporate Strategy

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

6. Finance / Resource Implications

The detailed financial position is available in a separate budget monitoring 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

Appendix 1	Key Performance Indicators Report
Appendix 2	Risk Scoring Matrix
Appendix 3	Corporate Risk Register – Key Business Risks
Appendix 4	Corporate Issues

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