

Overview and Scrutiny

1. This report summarises the business considered at the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Performance Panel held on 22 September 2022.

Performance Focus: Customer and Digital

2. We welcomed Executive Leader and Executive Member for Economic Development and Public Service Reform Councillor Alistair Bradley, Executive member for Homes and Housing Councillor Terry Howarth and Director of Commercial Services Mark Lester.
3. We heard of the challenges facing the property and commercial portfolio and there are five red projects, four amber and thirty-five green.
4. We were informed that the financial position is a concern and there is an overspend of 165%. The greatest spend is staffing, the cost of staffing is increasing. It is not an issue unique to Chorley, but all councils. The required use of temporary roles and agencies to fill positions that are in short supply such as building surveyors cause an increase in costs as rising demand meets limited supply. Two new surveyors are in post, and it is hoped that the shared services arrangement with South Ribble will assist in recruitment. The shortage of surveyors and inspectors the main focus was to complete projects, and it explains the low figure of 'reactive repair jobs inspected post work completion'.
5. The underperformance of returning land ownership enquiries is a symptom of staff shortage, and the measure is an add on service and not business critical.
6. The delays at Tatton due to the fire and resulting fungal contamination caused a loss of rental opportunities that was not budgeted for. We heard that Tatton will be opened in phases, some elements in October, and the remainder towards Christmas and the new year. To prevent further disruption, the work will be finished before residents move in. We heard that it is over budget due to the additional work required, and the reality that the costs of construction doubled in the last two years, an importance is placed on the finishing touches being done right and to ensure quality.
7. Parking income is down due to the continued Covid-19 changes. The new car parking strategy is to be presented later in the year. We questioned if contactless payment would be an option, the answer is unknown due to legislative barriers.
8. The continued work in refurbishing the market has been paused at the request of traders to prevent further disruption following Covid -19, and work is estimated to resume between Christmas and Easter.
9. The two community centres and office voids at the Digital Office Park both are better than target. The rent collected on the Digital Office Park was slightly behind and documented due to the staff shortage in the debt recovery team. Flexibility provided following Covid-19 came to an end and with debts increasing, repayment is being sought. There are positive indications that the Digital Office Park is busy. Covid impacted the community centres, some community groups that include the elderly or those at higher risk are more cautious in returning, however, 100% capacity is not ideal as it will prevent any further bookings taking place.

10. Town centre footfall accumulated at 1.75 million, an increase on quarter 1, and approaching the return to normality. The town centre vacancy rate was beyond the control of the council, but other town centres are considerably worse, and Chorley is recovering well in comparison. Percentage of rent collected is a concern, back dated rent is difficult to recover, but payment is required, or the unit will be vacated. The void on market walk is better than target, the lack of space a symptom of success. We noted the new developments out of the town centre are also busy, such as the new Starbucks. We also enquired into the continuation of pop up shops, or allocated space for temporary artisan sellers. There has been consideration for an artisan market from another town, but the quality was not of a standard desired and was not followed through. The council will ensure that the right operators are in the market and prevent destabilising the current arrangements.
11. Coach visits dropped to zero due to Covid but are returning quicker than expected and on a positive trajectory. The figure does not include football coaches. The coaches recorded are booked in advance for parking. Efforts are being made to actively promote tourism visits to the town. We enquired why only coach visits were counted rather than the rail service. We heard that coach numbers were what traders liked to see, and it was added that there is sophisticated software that collects information from mobile phones in the town centre and can assess where they have come from, how long they are in Chorley, and the data was shared with traders. The information is also used to track the success of campaigns attracting numbers to Chorley. We recommended other methods to advertise the town such as tote bags with a Chorley logo or slogan with leaflets advertising Chorley.
12. We noted that a consistent theme in the Performance Panels since Covid-19 was a lack of staff, and asked if in the last two years, the council had lost staff or if the council was in a need for more staff.
13. Mark Lester acknowledged that the council failed to keep a core staff compliment in line with the buildings owned. New buildings were acquired but the permanent posts were not created and instead required to acquire temporary staff, and a vicious cycle was created with the agency increasing costs as the demand grows and supply dwindles. There is optimism that Shared Services will attract staff, although at a lower salary compared to agency, there are greater benefits offered, e.g annual leave and pensions. From January 2023, the informal agreement between South Ribble and Chorley becomes formal. Brexit and Covid 19 also impacted recruitment and staffing.
14. Two graduates recently started, one in the estates team and the other on the property side. The council has a disparity in the age dynamic as there are junior members of staff starting their careers and those that are towards the end of the career, and there is the potential for potential succession issues due to market pressures.
15. Relating to accommodation, the report is positive with a lot of green, credit was given to the staff that enabled the positive results. There is an overall genuine need for accommodation. Rents collected, void percent, rent collated at Primrose Gardens, and percentage of voids at Primrose Gardens are all on target. Members are invited to be shown around the facility at any time.
16. The Cotswold Conference Facilities is a large room that during Covid was used to house rough sleepers and did not function in its original plan, and the target does not reflect its current use.

17. Covid impacted the results, but Primrose Gardens is not considered cheap due to the levels of support provided to residents, voids turned around longer than 14 days is not a concern.
18. The percentage of void in rented accommodation is 0%, and reflected the demand for quality accommodation provided by the council.
19. Bees Country Kitchen relocated into the café at Primrose Gardens and is more than capable of catering the café and function room.
20. We understood that the unfortunate, but usual reason for turnover at Primrose Gardens was death, nothing is recovered from the family, as the service charge covers the costs of repairs and cleaning. The users of Cotswold house are not in a position or circumstance to pay, and usually a small payment plan is arranged but is rarely worth recovering.
21. Chorley is fortunate that the majority of the schemes are coming to an end as costs are spiralling with rising uncertainty. The cost and uncertainty do not deter the council's ambition for further projects and developments due to the income provided to the council, although will not take unnecessary risk. Unlike other councils, Chorley is not taking from its reserve fund that maintains at £4 million.
22. We noted the report.

Business Plan Progress Update

23. We welcomed Howard Anthony, Interim Service Lead Performance and Partnerships to present the Business Plan Progress Update.
24. Performance is good, 181 projects across all directorates, the majority are green. The update is the first of the new plans that were formally agreed in June 2022. The projects that have not started will be due to begin in the next or following quarter, projects that are on hold need a reassessment of timescales.
25. Regular meetings take place to gain updates and determine the status of a project.
26. Some of the projects rated red is due to capacity issues which impacted the delivery of the business plans. Where this occurs, prioritised projects move to the forefront and others are revaluated and others are put on hold. Business plans are managed within directorates and monitored through their directorate management teams. The types of projects vary in size and scale and therefore executive cabinet members direct involvement in project delivery will vary based on the complexity of the project. The projects related to corporate strategy delivery as normal go through the quarterly monitoring reports and to the Executive Members.
27. We raised that there are serious projects that are on hold such as the flood defence work to the River Chor in Astley Park, animal welfare, health and safety, food safety and electrical safety.
28. We heard that there are a few projects that have progressed since the publication of the report, and the quarter two reporting is to be completed the week following the Performance Panel and updates will be provided.
29. Howard confirmed that he will return specific requests to Members when possible including if the café at primrose Gardens is open to the public, when the Pilot Project

for Occupational Therapy presence within Communities service will begin, an update on the flood defences and a number of projects relating to animal welfare and public protection.

30. We noted the update.

Recommendations

31. To note the report.

Councillor John Walker
Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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