

Minutes of **Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel**

Meeting date **Thursday, 10 March 2022**

Members present: Councillor John Walker (Chair), and Councillors Sarah Ainsworth and Aidy Riggott

Officers: Mark Lester (Director of Commercial Services) Victoria Willett (Service Lead - Transformation and Partnerships), Mark Lester (Director of Commercial and Property) and Jon-James Martin (Performance and Policy Officer) and Matthew Pawlyszyn (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

Apologies: Councillors Roy Lees and Julia Berry

Other Members: Councillors Alistair Bradley, Peter Gabbott and Alex Hilton

20.OSP.22 Minutes of meeting Thursday, 13 January 2022 of Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel

Decision: The minutes were approved as a correct record.

20.OSP.23 Declarations of Any Interests

No interests were declared.

20.OSP.24 Performance Focus - Commercial and Property

The Committee welcomed Executive Leader, Executive Member (Economic Development and Public Service Reform) Councillor Alistair Bradley, Executive Member (Homes and Housing) Councillor Peter Gabbott and Director of Commercial Services Mark Lester.

The performance of the directorate was in four parts,

- Development
- Property
- Markets and Town Centre
- Accommodation

Of the 45 projects,

- 39 (81%) were classified as green or completed.
- 4 (8%) were put on hold and
- 5 (10%) were rated amber.

The directorate's spending was slightly over budget, although generated income from the directorate could vary yearly. The biggest expenditure was staffing, there was a reduction of income due to the decrease in collection of market rents and the removal of the car parking charges prior to Christmas 2021 as part of the corporate bounce back. It was highlighted that the cost for the new car park came from the car park budget rather than the town centre budget.

It was understood that the difficulty in recruitment and gaps in the structure were a cause for the underperformance of some indicators.

During lockdown, the number of requests made to purchase freehold reversion and housing valuation increased, this resulted in the time taken to issue the letters.

The below target figure for the rent collected from Digital Office Park was due to Covid-19. The Council decided to allow those behind on their commercial rent time to recover and clear their arrears, but each case was dealt with on a case by case basis. There were guidance notes for enforcement and Officer discretion allowed. Businesses that requested grants or funding were required to provide the Council with their finances, and the Council learnt the sustainability of the businesses and had been able to offer advice and support where possible during the difficult period.

Voids in the covered market had mostly been resolved since the writing of the report, those outstanding were temporary the Council created to move units around. In other areas of the town centre excluding Market Walk, voids were below target at 14.7%. There were signs that the target of 7.5% would soon be met and exceeded, as long-term empty units were returning to the market. However, some larger units on Market Street were still empty, and under private landlords, of which the Council had no control over the rent. It was suggested that some rates levied by private landlords was too high and unsustainable considering the current market and economic environment.

The town centre vacancy rate was 11.2% with a target of 8%. The response rate for CCTV within 5 days was below target, no single reason provided an explanation, the answer was a mixture of variables.

With the reduction of Covid-19 restrictions, the Council desired to engage and support Community Centres re-opening. The current occupancy rate was 44.18% with a target of 51%. Prior to Covid-19, the occupancy rate was 60%.

Accommodation figures were positive. There was efficient use of assets, with lower rates of voids at Primrose Gardens and Cotswold House. There was some delay in payments that was related to housing benefits and by Quarter Four, this was expected to be rectified. Over the winter, the Cotswold facilities that were not being used due to Covid-19 were used by the Winter Watch Service to shelter people from the streets. The reopening of Primrose Gardens and its facilities was at a more cautious pace due to the vulnerability of residents.

Members questioned if the targets within the report related to Primrose and Cotswold were realistically achievable. It was confirmed that the performance targets were based on the business models that were, at the time a best guess, but there were factors with turnaround time that was out of the control of the Council, such as the circumstances in which units became available.

Members raised that they were unaware that there were conference facilities at Primrose. It was suggested that Members were given a tour of the facilities and gain a greater understanding of what the Council had to offer Communities and Community Groups.

Alker Lane, which was now known as Strawberry Meadows was one of the four corporate strategy projects. Approximately 60% of the units had been let. The larger units were to be rebranded and targeted to potential tenants. Strawberry Fields was expected to break even for the first time, although once conceived as hotdesking space had now been repurposed to create more fixed offices in response to the rise Covid-19, hybrid and home working, the sustainability of the proposed model was lost. It was currently uncertain if the project would need to return to council for additional investment.

The new Market Walk had a single remaining unit, there was no current rush to fill it, as potential options were being discussed. At present the empty unit was being used on a temporary basis by various charitable organisations to store collected aid for Ukraine, the Council provided temporary power provision to the unit.

The Town Centre witnessed the reemergence of custom, with increased footfall, but it was acknowledged that it would take time to get over the issues caused by two years of Covid-19, restrictions, and lockdowns. Coach visits was impacted by Covid, but both shopping and football coaches were returning.

Further improvements to the Town Centre was underway and was recently awarded 'Loo of the year' for the seventh year running.

£1,000,000 was being invested in Bengal Street and the issues at the Tatton Care Scheme have been resolved, with optimism that the completion programme was on track, and to be opened throughout 2022 and 2023.

The Whittle GP Surgery and Community Centre was due to open 17 March.

Mark Lester in response to Chair's request for an assessment of his time in the role expressed the benefit of hybrid working across two organisations. The two organisations were able to share expertise, capacity, and resources both formally and informally. The Shared Services allowed both councils to build and maintain strong working relationships and enabled stronger bids for grants and funding.

Decision: The report was noted.

20.OSP.25 Business Plans Progress Update 2021/22

The Committee welcomed Victoria Willett, Shared Service Lead - Transformation and Partnerships. She explained that the report was an end of year document and planning was underway to set the priorities for the coming year to support the corporate objectives.

The current business plans contain a total of 170 projects,

- 84 (49%) of projects were green,
- 18 (11%) amber,
- 55 (32%) had been completed,
- 9 (5%) on hold and

- 4 (2%) not started.

The report contained a graph representing the progress of each project, and for each project that was not green, the reasoning and planned action to correct the project was provided.

The cause of most of the amber indicators was related to the ongoing Covid recovery, capacity and staffing, ICT, and the prioritisation of other projects, in addition to other external factors outside the control of the Council.

Achievements to be highlighted included the resident satisfaction survey results, the 2021 events programme, delivered action on climate change, Astley Hall, the new Volunteering Policy, the South Ribble and Chorley Partnership and the previously covered Market and Town Centre improvements.

Appendix A contained the full list of 170 projects and their status. Those that were on hold to not started were to be evaluated, and a decision actioned if they were to move forward or to be differently resourced and prioritised.

It was confirmed that the list would be checked and monitored for any errors that may indicate that items were previously classified as red and were now classified as 'not started'. To explain how projects went from 'not started' or 'red' in the previous monitoring to 'completed' at this point in the year, it was likely that additional resource, such as external consultancy, had been allocated to accelerate and complete certain projects.

When considering capacity to deliver projects, recruitment to key roles was highlighted as being critical. Recruitment was ongoing, however, the Council intended to recruit internally to ensure opportunities and pathways for staff development, but this impacted time to fill all vacancies. The Council recently changed the way recruitment and roles were advertised. On the old system, the process was in house and an example provided was that an advertised position received 7 applications, on the new recruitment platform the same advertised position received nearly 80, which provided a broader range of potential candidate. The Council also intended to develop a People Strategy, which set out workforce development and succession planning by targeting particular markets or to grow and develop staff in house through apprenticeships and graduate schemes.

IT have reviewed their service with substantial work completed on systems behind the scenes as a priority; as a result the Council is now in a much better position and had been far more resilient to recent security risks. Focus was now on the front end technical support across the organisation.

Chair

Date