

Minutes of **Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel**

Meeting date **Thursday, 22 September 2022**

Committee Members present: Councillor John Walker (Chair), Councillor Roy Lees (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Sarah Ainsworth, James Nevett, Michelle Le Marinel and Arjun Singh

Observers present: Councillors Julia Berry and Alex Hilton

Officers: Mark Lester (Director of Commercial Services), Howard Anthony (Performance & Partnerships Team Leader), Robert Langford (Performance and Partnerships Officer) and Matthew Pawlyszyn (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

Other Members: Councillor Alistair Bradley (Executive Leader, and Executive Member for Economic Development and Public Service Reform) and Councillor Terry Howarth (Executive Member for Homes and Housing)

A video recording of the public session of this meeting is available to view on [YouTube here](#)

5 Minutes of meeting Wednesday, 27 July 2022 of Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting were approved as a correct record.

6 Declarations of Any Interests

No declarations were made.

7 Performance Focus: Commercial and Property

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 presented the report.

The directorate faced considerable challenges due to the increase in the cost of living, staffing, energy, and construction costs in addition to numerous delays. There were five projects rated red, four amber and thirty-five green.

The financial position was a concern with an overspend of 165%, the highest cost was staffing and the increased use of temporary and agency staff to fill positions. This issue was not unique to Chorley Council. Two new surveyors were in post, and it was hoped that the Shared Services arrangement with South Ribble would assist with recruitment. Within Shared Services, there was an informal agreement to share estate and property employees, which was to become formal in January 2023.

To explain the issue with staffing, it was summarised that the Council failed to keep the core staff numbers in line with the buildings owned which resulted in the necessity of temporary posts and agency staff, which due to demand was at a higher cost.

It was also noted that the Council could be in a position where there was a risk of succession issues due to the number of staff at the start of their careers and the number at the ends of their careers.

With the shortage of surveyors and inspectors, the focus had been on completing projects, and it explained the low figures of 'reactive repair jobs inspected post work completion. The underperformance of 'returning land ownership enquiries was another symptom of staff shortage, but the service was an add on and not business critical.

A significant loss of potential income was from the delay with Tatton Gardens following the fire and the subsequent fungal contamination. It was decided to resolve the problem sooner rather than later. The opening would be phased, which would take place in October and Christmas/new year. Members were reassured that the finishing touches were prioritised, and corners would not be cut, and quality ensured.

The income from the car parks were down due to the continuation of the Covid charges. A new car park strategy was to be introduced at the end of the year. In response to a query relating to contactless payments, there was uncertainty due to the legislation in place.

The market refurbishment had been paused at the request of traders to prevent disruption following Covid, the work was estimated to resume between Christmas and Easter.

Market footfall had accumulated to 1.75 million and indicated that normality was returning to the town centre. It was noted that the town centre vacancy rates were beyond the control of the council, however the town centre was recovering better than other town centres across the county. It was noted that there were increasingly popular developments out of the town centre. When questioned about specialised, artisanal or one-off stores, the council was open to accommodate, but it had to be the right trader with the right quality goods.

The voids on the covered market was at operational target, and space allowed movement from within. Voids on market walk was better than expected. The lack of space was a symptom of success.

The percentage of rent collected was a concern, but actions in place to collect outstanding rent.

The targets for the community centres and office voids at the Digital Office Park were both better than the target. The staff shortage impacted the recovery of debts, the flexibility allowed during and following Covid-19 came to an end, and repayments were

sought. The community centres were impacted by Covid-19, and some community groups that included the elderly and those at higher risk were more cautious in returning. It was highlighted that 100% capacity was not ideal as it would prevent further bookings taking place.

Visiting coaches dropped to zero during Covid-19 and returned quicker than expected. It was highlighted that the coaches did not include visiting football fans, only shoppers. This was explained that the coaches were booked in advance, and there were active steps taken to promote visitors to the town centre. When enquired why only coaches were recorded instead of the rail services, it was explained that the method was favoured by traders. It was noted that there was software that tracked mobile phones and provided information which indicated where the shopper had come from, how long they were in the town centre and where they went in the town. The information was shared with traders and was used to track the success of tourist and communication's campaigns. Members offered a suggestion of distributing tote bags with the Chorley logo or slogan with further advertisement literature inside.

In relation to accommodation, the report was optimistic, and credit was given to the staff that enabled the positive results. There were clear signs that there was a need for accommodation in the borough. Rents collected, the void percentage, rent collected at Primrose Gardens, and voids at Primrose gardens were all on target.

For the targets that were red, it was explained that the Cotswold conference facility during the pandemic was used to house rough sleepers and it never fulfilled its initial function.

The percentage of voids at Primrose Gardens turned around in 14 days underperformed due to Covid, but it was not deemed to be a concern due to the nature of the residential needs and the costs involved.

Percentage of voids in council owned rented accommodation was 0% which highlighted the need and demand for quality rented accommodation provided by a good landlord.

It was clarified that damages were not sought from the vacated rooms in Primrose Gardens and Tatton Gardens, the turnover was unfortunately usually the result of death. The cost of repair, replacing and refurbishing would be built into the service charges. At Cotswold House, the residents were not usually in a position to pay, but payment plans could be set but, but were not usually successful and not deemed cost effective to chase.

It was summarised that with the spiralling costs and uncertainty, Chorley Council was in a fortunate position that most projects were nearing completion. The council did not rule out the possibility of further projects to boost its income, but needless and unnecessary risks would not be taken. The council was in a positive position not requiring the use of its reserve funds.

Resolved: The report was noted

8 Business Plan Progress Update

The majority of the 181 projects were green and it was the first update of the new plans following the formal agreement in June 2022. Projects that had yet to start were expected to start in the next or the following quarter. The projects on hold required a reassessment of time scales.

Regular meetings took place to gain updates and determine the status of a project.

Some of the projects that were rated red were due to capacity issues that impacted the delivery of the business plans. When this occurred, prioritised projects moved to the forefront and the others reevaluated while others were put on hold. The decisions were usually made within the directorate and Cabinet Members were not involved in each project, as some were small in scale and discrete. The projects that were related to the Corporate Strategy would go through the quarterly monitoring reports and to the Executive Members.

Members raised concerns that there were projects on hold such as the flood defense work to the River Chor in Astley Park, animal welfare, health and safety, food safety and electrical safety. Updates would be provided that related to the on-hold projects, and the Members were informed that there were projects that had progressed since the publication of the report. Members would also be informed if the café at Primrose Gardens was open to the public as well as residents when the pilot project for occupational therapy will begin and the flood defenses.

Resolved: The report was noted

Chair

Date