

**Questions raised by Overview and Scrutiny Committee at meeting held on
14 July 2020**

Questions raised by Overview and Scrutiny	Response from officers
Performance Tracker – Priority: Finance and Resources	
<p>Objective 3 – Action a) Deliver the aims and objectives of the commercial property investment strategy – A Member sought clarification as to the number of properties that had actually been purchased as the information within this report conflicted with the financial report that had been considered by the Executive Committee the previous week.</p>	<p>The Head of Finance and Asset Management explained that this was a timing issue - the information within the performance tracker reflected quarter four of 2019/20 and the commercial premises had not been acquired during the 2019/20 financial year. Since that time, the acquisition of an industrial park in Tipton had been finalised and contracts had also been exchanged in relation to a premises in Crawley. He believed these would be the Council's final two purchases given the impact of COVID-19 on various commercial sectors and due to restrictions on borrowing from the Public Works Loans Board.</p>
<p>Objective 3 – Action b) Undertake a review of the discretionary trade waste service to ensure it is operating on a viable commercial level – A Member noted that the target date for this action had been changed numerous times and he sought assurance that the new date of September 2020 was achievable.</p>	<p>The Head of Community Services explained that the most recent delay was as a result of COVID-19 and a meeting had been held with the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE), which had been appointed to undertake the review, to discuss the market analysis just three days prior to lockdown. All businesses had subsequently closed so it had been impossible to make contact with them in order to carry out the analysis. He confirmed that work had now restarted and would tie in with the business surveys being carried out on the High Street. Whilst September would be too early to bring forward the full business case, as originally planned, an update would be provided to the Committee at its meeting on 1 September 2020.</p>

<p>Objective 4 – Action b) Disposal of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) site – A Member recognised that this was linked to the Parking Strategy Review and noted that the Working Group had not met since February.</p>	<p>The Head of Finance and Asset Management explained that he had started work on a revised timetable for the review and it was proposed that a Working Group meeting be held in September to seek Members’ views as to whether the work to date could be continued or if there was a need to start from scratch. As such, the timeframe for the review would be dictated by Members and the approach they wanted to take.</p> <p>A Member expressed the view that the MAFF site was also connected to Spring Gardens and the regeneration of Tewkesbury town centre – both sites had been problematic prior to COVID-19 and he felt they could be even more of an issue going forward. In his view, it was important to find the right solutions and he raised concern that the new target date of October 2020 would not be achievable. The Head of Finance and Asset Management was in complete agreement and explained that the new target date had been set before Officers fully understood the impact on resources of COVID-19; as such, Members could expect this date to change in the quarter one performance tracker once a realistic timescale had been established through working with consultants and Members.</p>
<p>Performance Tracker Priority: Promoting and Supporting Economic Growth</p>	

Objective 2 – Action a) Deliver employment land through the Joint Core Strategy (JCS) and Tewkesbury Borough Plan – A Member noted that the date for the JCS had been revised again having previously been amended twice and questioned whether this was realistic. In addition, he asked how many employment sites would be changed to housing, as was the case in Longford where a site designated for employment land had now had an application approved for housing.

The Interim Head of Development Services explained that this action had initially been based around a less extensive review of the JCS; however, things had moved on and a full JCS review was now required. In addition, there had been an initial delay to allow recruitment to a key post within the Planning Policy team to enable the review to be undertaken. She had spoken with the Planning Policy Manager and JCS Manager who were confident that consultation would take place before Christmas. She explained that a lot of evidence-based research had been programmed to support the review prior to consultation so this target date was considered to be reasonable given the scale of the JCS and the amount of work that went into bringing the programme forward. Notwithstanding this, the national policy statement that was coming forward later in the month could have an impact on the timeframe.

In terms of employment land, she advised that this would be brought forward within the JCS review and would be underpinned by a significant amount of evidence-based research. The strategic sites had not been identified as yet although the Tewkesbury Borough Plan was due to be examined and significant weight could be attached to the policies within it. Planning applications coming forward were being dealt with on their own merits.

<p>Objective 5 – Action b) Review the tourism resources to maximise the tourist provisions in the borough – A Member questioned why the independent tourism review had not been commissioned given that the original target date for completion was April 2019 which had subsequently been changed several times and had last been reported as March 2020 therefore should have been relatively unaffected by COVID-19.</p>	<p>The Interim Head of Development Services explained that her understanding was that a significant amount of discussions had been taking place internally, particularly with respect to the Tourist Information Centres; however, she would provide a briefing note to update Members more fully following the meeting. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that the Community and Economic Development Manager was the Lead Officer overseeing this work; however, the review was a commissioned piece of work and the proposed consultants had a good amount of experience in the area having done similar reviews for Cheltenham Borough Council and other local authorities. He recognised this was a workstream prior to COVID-19 and would need to find out why the review had not been commissioned earlier and report back to Members outside of the meeting.</p>
<p>Performance Tracker – Priority: Growing and Supporting Communities</p>	
<p>Objective 1 – Action a) Work with partners to undertake the required reviews to the JCS – A Member noted that the commentary stated that the target date had been amended from spring 2020 to reflect more up-to-date timescales and he sought clarification as to the reason for the timescale slipping.</p>	<p>The Interim Head of Development Services confirmed that the revised target date of winter 2020 was a realistic timescale and she reiterated her earlier point that the intention had originally been that this would be a review of the existing JCS as opposed to a full scale JCS review coming forward. She confirmed that the amendment to the timetable was not related to COVID-19 and was for programme management and resourcing reasons. The Member felt this should have been explained in the commentary and the Interim Head of Development Services undertook to ensure the tracker was more comprehensive in quarter one of 2020/21.</p>

<p>Objective 3 – Action b) Achieve the Council’s affordable homes target by working with local housing providers – A Member noted that 191 affordable homes had been delivered within the year against a target of 220 and he queried whether affordable homes in urban extensions, such as Brockworth, counted towards Tewkesbury Borough Council’s figures or Gloucester City Council’s figures. He raised concern that if it was the latter, there would be less and less space within the borough for affordable homes and he questioned what the long term impact of that would be and if the target for this action should be reduced accordingly.</p>	<p>The Head of Community Services confirmed that anything being built within the urban extensions did count towards the figures for Tewkesbury Borough as its residents had equal status to bid on those properties. Longer term, he suggested there would be a need to report this as a separate KPI so that Members could easily see what had been delivered within the urban extensions and that was something which could be considered during the development of the new Housing Strategy.</p>
<p>Objective 4 – Action a) Develop a programme to work with landlords to ensure residents have a supply of rented properties to meet their needs – A Member noted there had been three placements under the scheme but the information did not set out how many people needed rented properties, as such, it was impossible to know whether this action was being achieved and if the smiley face attributed to it was justified.</p>	<p>The Head of Community Services advised that six placements had now been made. The number of people on the housing register currently was 1,108 but not all of those people would be suitable for private rented accommodation. The pilot scheme was about providing incentives to encourage private sector landlords to accept more tenants and it was intended to bring a report on this to a future meeting of the Committee so Members would receive more detail in due course.</p>
<p>Key Performance Indicators for Priority: Growing and Supporting Communities</p>	
<p>KPI 10 – Total number of active applications on the housing register – A Member indicated that the breakdown of bands i.e. emergency, gold, silver and bronze totalled 1,676 which was not equal to the quarter four outturn which was stated as 1,775.</p>	<p>The Head of Community Services explained that this was due to a timing issue; banding changed on a daily basis so the information needed to be extracted from the system at the same time as the number of applications. He apologised that had not been done on this occasion and undertook to ensure the figures were extracted at the same time when producing future reports.</p>
<p>Performance Tracker – Priority: Customer-focused services</p>	

<p>Objective 1 – Action b) To continue to proactively enforce against enviro-crimes including fly-tipping and dog fouling in accordance with the action plan – A Member wished to thank the Environmental Health team for their hard work during the lockdown period when there had been increased incidents of noise complaints and fly-tipping etc. The feedback he had received from the way Officers had been supporting people, particularly in respect of noise, had been very positive.</p>	<p>The Head of Community Services undertook to pass thanks on to the Environmental Health team on behalf of the Committee.</p>
<p>Objective 1 – Action d) Review our Advice and Information Centres (AICs) - A Member expressed the view that the AICs were duplicating some of the services that were provided through other methods, for example, the Community team and Members, and he felt that a review needed to be carried out as quickly as possible.</p>	<p>The Head of Corporate Services advised that the AICs had been reviewed by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group on two occasions in the past and it was felt that another review was timely to establish whether they were still value for money given that the landscape for customer engagement had changed significantly in recent years. He felt there was probably a difference in the role played by the Customer Services Advisers who worked in the AICs and that of Members and Community Services Officers and advised that some of their tasks included things such as taking payments and collecting housing benefit applications etc. but he took the point that there may be other ways to do this which offered more value for money. Whilst it had originally been intended to establish another Working Group to carry out a review, COVID-19 was likely to have a significant impact on the Council's budget going forward and the AICs may be one area where savings could be made, as such, it may now be more appropriate to consider the AICs as part of the revised budget proposals. The Head of Finance and Asset Management echoed these comments and advised that work on the new Medium Term Financial Strategy was due to start later in the month. There would undoubtedly be some serious financial pressures as existing budget pressures had been exacerbated by COVID-19, as such, the Council would have some difficult decisions to make over the next 12 months to three years.</p>

<p>Objective 3 – Action a) Explore options to provide online public access to interactive planning policy information maps – A Member raised concern that the target date for this was now March 2021; given that it was an action to ‘explore options’ as opposed to actually delivering anything he was surprised that little progress had been made.</p>	<p>The Interim Head of Development Services accepted this point and undertook to clarify the wording so that Members understood what had been achieved to date and what was proposed going forward.</p>
<p>Objective 3 – Action b) Introduce the option for paperless billing for Council tax and business rates – A Member noted that, at the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, Members had been informed that this had been delayed due to an issue with a third party and he questioned whether any financial costs incurred would be recovered.</p>	<p>The Head of Corporate Services confirmed there had been an issue with the contract supplier and discussions were ongoing between One Legal and the supplier’s legal team; he undertook to provide an update on the outcome of those discussions as part of the next performance management report. He went on to advise that an in-house solution was on the cusp of being launched for the ad-hoc billing prior to COVID-19 but those resources had been redeployed elsewhere. He was hopeful of a solution being in place in time for the main billing run in February 2021.</p>
<p>Key Performance Indicators for Priority: Customer Focused Services</p>	
<p>KPI 18 – Number of reported enviro-crimes – A Member was disappointed to note the increase in fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles and questioned whether there was a particular reason for this during the quarter.</p>	<p>The Head of Community Services indicated that no intelligence had been received to explain the increase which had been experienced countywide, although closure of the Household Recycling Centres at the end of the year may have had some impact. He provided assurance that prosecutions and court cases were being advertised and promoted so he did not think this was a reason for the increase, although that did not make it any less disappointing. It was noted that the restrictions at the Household Recycling Centres were being eased with additional timeslots being introduced so they would soon be operating at full capacity.</p>

KPI 27 – Average number of sick days per full-time equivalent – A Member raised concern that the average number of sick days per full time equivalent for 2019/20 was 12.6 which seemed quite high particularly compared to the national average of 4.4 per employee. She noted that this had been attributed to the amount of long term sickness absences but she sought assurance about the amount of short term absences and whether next year's target could be more ambitious.

The Head of Corporate Services indicated that he could not comment on the national average but he understood that the average number of sick days within the public sector was eight in accordance with the Council's target for 2019/20. The situation was improving in quarter one of 2020/21 with the average number of sick days currently being reported as 2.09 per full-time equivalent; if COVID-19 related absences were removed this would be as low as 1.58 days per full-time equivalent. He reiterated that long term absences had impacted on the figures for 2019/20 and, unfortunately, there had been a lot of significant illnesses which could not have been avoided but he was pleased to report that a lot of the staff affected had now returned to work. All KPIs and their targets were being reviewed as part of the new performance tracker so the suggestion to set a more ambitious target for sickness absence would be considered as part of that.

A Member indicated that the biggest issue was actually short term sickness which had seen a 40% increase between 2018/19 and 2019/20. He questioned how much of this was down to shielding due to COVID-19 and how short term sickness was controlled and monitored. In response, the Head of Corporate Services explained that the new HR Manager had been in post since December 2019 and had been tasked with looking into ways to improve short term sickness absence. He provided assurance that the Council had a robust Absence Management Policy and HR worked closely with Managers to ensure due process was followed if the triggers within the policy were hit. He advised that 29 days were attributable to COVID-19 and they only related to people who could not physically work; those who were shielding or symptomatic but able to work were not included.

Appendix 1

KPI 28 – Percentage of waste recycled or composted – A Member questioned whether the percentage was actually down or whether this could be attributed to the amount, for instance, if it was based on weight then things such as manufacturers making packaging lighter could be a contributing factor, and he queried whether it was being measured in the most accurate way.

The Head of Community Services confirmed that the KPI was based on the percentage of waste that went for recycling and was the standard measure used by the government to set targets. The national target for England was 50% and the average for Gloucestershire was 44% so Tewkesbury Borough Council continued to perform well comparatively; he pointed out that 43% more waste – both residual and recycling - had been collected during April and May 2020. He was unsure how helpful information on weight would be but was happy to include this in the narrative if Members so wished. He suggested that the sad face attributed to this KPI may be misleading as Tewkesbury Borough was within the upper quartile in the county and only just short of the national 50% target for 2019/20.