West Oxfordshire District Council

Productivity Plan
2024

WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

1. Foreword

The Government is reviewing productivity across the public sector and local government is part of that exercise. The Local Government Finance Settlement earlier this year announced that councils would be asked to produce Productivity Plans and submit them to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities by the 19th July 2024.

The Government asked local authorities to consider the following four themes and evidence of our approach to each of these is outlined in the Plan.

1. How the council has transformed the way it designs and delivers services to make better use of resources
2. How the council plans to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design, and use of resources
3. The council's plans to reduce wasteful spend within the organisation
4. What are the barriers that prevent local government making progress and what can the government do to help reduce or remove them?

Improving productivity, performance and efficiency has been a theme running through service delivery across the council for many years. We are committed to providing modern 'value for money' services while maintaining one of the lowest council tax rates in England.
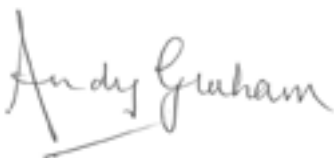
This Productivity Plan outlines many of the activities we are undertaking to ensure we continue to fulfil this commitment while also delivering high quality services and addressing the priorities for West Oxfordshire.

Last year the authority adopted a new ambitious Council Plan which outlined its commitment to the residents of West Oxfordshire through five priorities:

• Putting Residents First
• Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All
• Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife
• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
• Working Together for West Oxfordshire

The council is currently reviewing how it delivers a number of key locality-based services to help it deliver these priorities.

The West Oxfordshire Council Plan 2023-2027 is published on the council's website - https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/fv5foehk/west-oxfordshire-council-plan-2023-to-2027.pdf

Councillor Andy Graham
Leader of the Council

Giles Hughes
Chief Executive

2.   The council and its priorities

The Council Plan

In January 2023, the council adopted the new West Oxfordshire Council Plan 2023-2027. It was developed using resident feedback from the 'Your Voice Counts' consultation with residents, organisations, businesses and the 81 Town and Parish Councils. Their input directly shaped the Council Plan to ensure we continue to take targeted action on issues important locally.

The Council Plan sets out our vision for the future which is:

"Shaping West Oxfordshire as a District which offers a fulfilling and meaningful quality of life for our residents with opportunities for all to flourish. A thriving and prosperous place for entrepreneurs and businesses, where local people and visitors can enjoy the beauty and heritage of our landscape, built, farmed and natural environment."

To achieve this, we have five priorities of equal importance which will guide the work we do:

Putting Residents First
Putting residents, young and old, at the heart of what we do.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All
The council will be a hive of activity to help build and support thriving towns and villages that provide residents with a high quality of life by supporting a vibrant local economy, homes and infrastructure that meet people's needs, excellent health and wellbeing and ensuring equal access to opportunity for all.

Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife
The council will be a progressive custodian of our environmental resources, supporting a healthy natural landscape and functioning ecosystem which is rich in wildlife and habitats that are enjoyed by and benefit all.

Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
The council will be a community leader in responding to the challenges of climate change, including rapidly reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing the district and its communities for the impacts of climate change to ensure a fair transition for all to a future that will be defined by climate change.

Working Together for West Oxfordshire
The council recognises that to deliver on our aspirations and the priorities in this Council Plan for West Oxfordshire, working collaboratively with others will be essential.

Council performance and Financial Strategy

We actively manage service performance and productivity because we are committed to providing high quality services that deliver value for money to residents and businesses in West Oxfordshire.

Although there is no national ranking system for local authority performance, many sources published by the government and national media confirm that West Oxfordshire District Council is among the top performing local authorities in the country.

The council's performance framework provides a holistic picture of performance combining information from the following areas:

- Service Performance
- Projects
- Risk & Opportunities
- Council Plan Priorities
- Finance

Our latest performance report is published on the council website - https://meetings.westoxon.gov.uk/documents/s10810/Annex%20C%20-%20Performance%20Report%20Q4%202023-2024.pdf

The council adopted its latest Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in February 2024, and this is published on its website - https://meetings.westoxon.gov.uk/documents/s10028/Annex%20C%20-%20MTFS%202024-25.pdf

3.   Our approach to service transformation

A wide range of council services are delivered through local authority owned companies Publica and Ubico, both of which West Oxfordshire District Council are a shareholder. In addition, the council is in a partnership with a range of local authorities to provide Internal Audit Services (South West Audit Partnership), Legal Services, and Counter Fraud and Enforcement Services.

Collaboration with other local authorities has enabled the council to transform the way it delivers public services, make efficiencies through a new operating model and also improve services for residents. This way of working has already delivered in excess of £13M cumulative savings for the partnership, in addition extremely high rates of customer satisfaction. Two examples of service transformation across the council are summarised below:

Customer Services

Over the last few years, the council has been introducing new digital channels and improving those that already existed. We have formed a multi-skilled `Channel Choice Team' to improve digital access, particularly in high volume contact areas such as Waste, Revenues and Benefits, and Planning.

During the last three years (2021-2023) the volume of telephone calls has reduced by just over 37% (from 230,570 in 2021 to 144,063 in 2023). In the same period the use of digital forms has increased by 350% (from 32,842 in 2021 to 115,255 in 2023).

The council has maintained its position in the GovMetric top ten performing councils for customer satisfaction, whilst also making annual efficiency savings of £125,000.

Planning & Development Management

Planning services suffered from expert planners spending time undertaking administrative tasks, having small support teams with single points of failure and in slow processing times during 2021, with as few as 64% of applications being processed within the target timescale.

In response to recognising that performance needed to improve, the council was able to mobilise a range of specialists from our Planning, Business Information and Data, HR, and IT Teams to support service improvement, leading to 100% of minor planning application being processed in under 8 weeks in June 2024 (The Government target is 70%). The improvements were reported to The Councils' Executive in June 2023 – https://meetings.westoxon.gov.uk/documents/s7904/8%20-%20 WODC%20DM%20Executive%20Report%20-%2012-07-2023.pdf

4. How we use data and technology

The council has an ongoing programme of improvement around its use of data and technology.

Use of data

We are a data-led organisation, using data in a number of ways to improve the overall performance of our services, these include:

- Strategically focusing on improving both the speed and quality of data available to services and residents in order to drive improved decision making
- The development of a suite of dashboards that provide comprehensive data to support strategic decision making and operational management

We are also looking to use data to help solve issues by thinking outside the box. A good example is our work with Thames Water. The council has used its data skills to develop a working knowledge of the components and data used by Thames Water to calculate the necessary capacity of its Sewage Treatment Works (STWs). This work initially focused on the 9 largest STWs across the district and enabled them to identify where there was not enough treatment capacity to meet the current needs and press for their inclusion in Thames Water's investment programmes. This work has been recognised nationally and shortlisted in the MJ Awards.

Taking advantage of technology

The council has also embraced new technology and has invested in improvements to increase efficiency and improve service delivery, using the Salesforce platform and Civica Portal. Over this financial year we plan to:

- Install new heating and energy technology in our buildings to reduce our running costs and carbon footprint
- Continue to improve our digital service offering to help make customer service interactions more efficient and effective for both customers and the council
- Invest in in-cab technology to support the delivery of our Street Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance Services and reduce our impact on the environment

This builds on our recent work including:

- Our work as part of the Government PropTech Innovation Fund. We developed an 'Artifical Intelligence tool' that saved a considerable amount of officer time, making the Local Plan process much more efficient while also increasing community engagement
- Wide ranging improvements to our website, creating new forms and online routes for residents to quickly and easily access our services
- The introduction of In-Cab technology, helping to ensure our waste collection teams have up to date round data, which also links to the council's Customer Relationship Management' system (CRM), so helping to reduce missed collections, the costs associated with rescheduling the collection of these, and the impact on the environment

5.   Our approach to change and efficiency

We are already a lean and efficient council following many years of work to improve performance and drive efficiency, however, we are always looking to continue our improvement journey.

Following the COVID Pandemic, the council undertook a review of its assets to reflect the changing way staff now work that resulted in the freeing up of a significant amount of office space, which is in the process of being let to a local company who provide professional working environments on both a short and long term basis. A further benefit of the review is that staff are based in one primary location and the number of multi-functional devices has been reduced so creating both an environmental benefit and an annual revenue saving.

A Commissioning and Procurement Board has been established with the aim of identifying opportunities to share procurement and take advantage of economies of scale with other partner councils. It will also challenge the way goods and services are commissioned, to ensure the most effective approach and route to market are used. A recent joint procurement with Oxford City Council and Cherwell District Council to provide a recycling processing contract will deliver very significant efficiencies. The council has also commissioned a review of external consultants it uses to ensure these provide the authorities with value for money.

Partnership Working

Partnership working continues to be a key vehicle for service delivery within the council, allowing synergy regarding information sharing, learning and efficiencies. Examples include:

- In partnership with the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council, and South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell District Councils, the Council produced an Oxfordshire Councils Charter which includes a commitment to more effective working across the three tiers of Local Government and to further enhance and promote local democracy across the County. The Charter was launched in July 2024

- A review for allocating the grants budget to ensure that the outcomes funded from this budget are aligned with the Council Plan priorities was undertaken. A crowdfunding platform has been established, levering in additional grant funding on top of the Council's pledge budget to the voluntary and community sector, and three year Service Level Agreements awarded to specific organisations to drive longer term ambition from that investment. Further detail can be found at https://westoxon.gov.uk/communities-and-leisure/community-grants-and-funding/

- The council allocates budget to support the Voluntary and Community Sector, working in partnership to address local issues efficiently and with maximum impact. A review for allocating the grants budget to ensure that the outcomes from this activity are aligned with the Council Plan priorities www.westoxon.gov.uk

6.   Barriers to change

There are several ways that government could help local authorities plan for future years with greater certainty and confidence. These include:

- A move to multi-year financial settlements which would enable local authorities to plan for the longer term

- Allowing greater freedom with regards to spending ring fenced grants to allow more local decision making

- Stop the 'begging bowl' culture of bidding for funding from individual government departments and which requires significant resources to prepare submissions and brings funding uncertainty involved in whether bids are successful or not

- New reforms, such as the Extended Producer Responsibility (Packaging), should provide information, as soon as possible, on the potential income, and obligations, for local authorities

- The relatively small size of Local Government ICT marketplace presents an opportunity to create a national model / hub similar to the Police Digital Service (PDS) and NHS Digital

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