Business Plan 2026 to 2028

Preparing for the Future

PUBLICA

CHELTENHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

COTSWOLD District Council

Forest of Dean DISTRICT COUNCIL

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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1. Foreword

Frank Wilson
Interim Managing Director

Christine Gore
Chair of the Board

In 2026, local government in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire stands on the cusp of the most significant change in a generation. In both counties the last year has involved the creation of business cases to meet central government's challenge to move to a standardisation of local government structures across the country. This 'unitarisation' of local government, merging county council and district council responsibilities, will impact all employees, councillors, residents and businesses within our partner council boundaries.

Change of this magnitude will inevitably impact the services Publica provides to its councils. Indeed, the councils, our shareholders, will cease to exist from April 2028 and will be replaced by new organisations. Establishing what this means for Publica, and therefore our employees, is critical over the next year so that we can provide a level of reassurance for them. Providing this clarity for the future will help us ensure that we can continue to deliver high quality services to our residents and businesses as we move through this period of significant change.

In 2025, submissions were made to the government which set out options for the future. For our shareholders this could mean that they will combine to become part of two or three councils in the future, which will be larger in scale and cover a broader range of responsibilities. The government anticipates making a final decision on what structures will look like in July 2026 with new councils going live on 1 April 2028.

Given the scale of transition required to establish new organisations (including elections in 2027), it is critical that the councils, with Publica playing its part, prepare for this new world. It is critical that we do not wait for the final decision but start preparation now – and we can confirm that it has already started.

The first year of this two-year business plan has a heavy focus on planning and preparing (where we can) for any changes. This will involve providing options for our shareholders to consider as they work with their partners across Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire in building future organisational plans. Whilst doing this, we will continue to make the case, where appropriate, for the shared delivery model that Publica demonstrates – a model that has delivered savings to our shareholders over the years at a level of almost twice the original business case.

The second year of the business plan will see both Publica and the councils move into delivery mode for the new councils – building the new organisations, establishing the infrastructure and supporting our people through this period of change.

Of course, in delivering all these changes for the future we cannot ignore the present, not only delivering great core services but also helping our councils deliver their legacy projects, ensuring residents are not disadvantaged by any future changes to structures, and ensuring the new councils get as clean a start as possible.

2. Introduction: The Publica Business Plan

Publica's Articles of Association have twelve reserved matters for shareholder council approval. This makes sure that they retain the necessary control over their 'Teckal' company. Adopting or amending the business plan is one of the reserved matters.

This business plan is for two years, reflecting the run up to local government reorganisation and the significant change that will bring. The main purpose of this plan is to:

- Continue the focus on delivering the shareholder councils' priorities and their legacies.
- Continue to deliver great, value for money services to residents and businesses on behalf of the councils.
- Recognise the need to balance continued provision of services whilst contributing to the significant work required to prepare for Local Government Reorganisation.
- Support and prepare our people and services for change as we build towards Local Government Reorganisation.

Our performance of key services across the year

BENEFITS

54,593

residents supported with applications

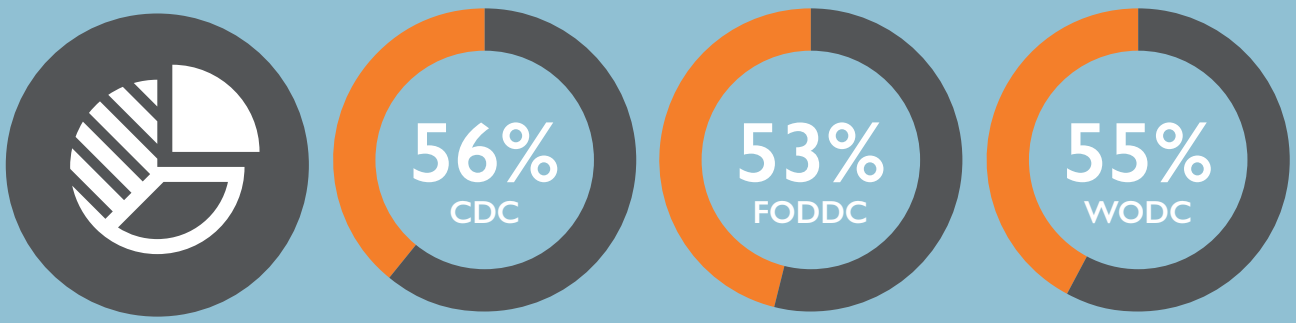
HOUSING

504

residents prevented from becoming homeless

WASTE

Our partnership delivers some of the best recycling rates nationally



£4.6M

cummulative savings from environmental services innovation programme

74,237

green licences sold

PEOPLE

130

Completed carbon literacy training

661

Staff supported through learning and development

CUSTOMER SERVICE

11%

Fewer phone calls

Over 185,000

Customer service cases opened

98%

of customers satisfied

★★★★★

REGULATORY

6,000

Planning applications validated

1,334

Food businesses inspected

3. The Publica Values

The Publica values will continue to help and guide us through the transition.

Authentic

We act genuinely and transparently. We do the right thing for our customers, our organisation and each other.

Modern

We are not set in our ways. We are constantly looking to find ways to innovate and do things smarter.

Flexible

We are agile - adapting how and what we do to meet the demands of our customers, our colleagues, our local communities and the needs of the modern world.

Thoughtful

We take pride in delivering a great service, taking the time to understand and care about the planet and the environment, as well as our customers and their needs.

Following both phases of transferring services from Publica, partner councils have introduced their own values and behaviours, developed collectively by both Publica and council employees.

Whilst each council may have subtly different values, these all overlap and complement our Publica values. We believe that all employees, regardless of their employer, should be happy to live by all the values that are agreed across the partnership.

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THE CHELTENHAM TRUST

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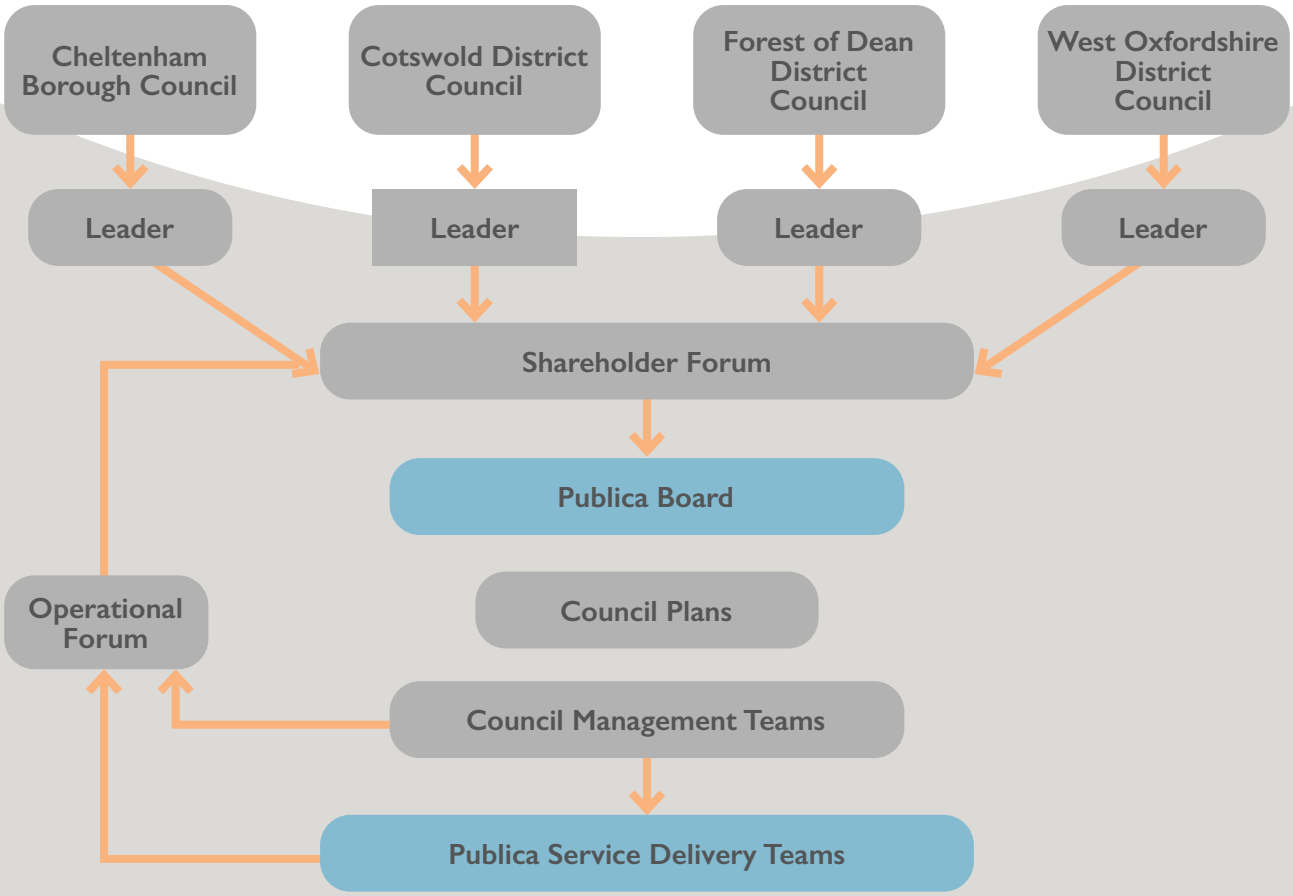
4. Re-imagining Publica

Having successfully delivered the Publica Review, the services which now remain within Publica are those which are more traditionally delivered under shared service arrangements. This creates an opportunity as both Publica and the councils collectively face the new challenge of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

Following the transition of services, the councils are more focused on their role as commissioner of the services received from Publica and other strategic partners. Changes have been made to reshape the Publica Board and update governance arrangements including extending and simplifying service agreements, rejuvenating the Shareholder Forum, and introducing a new Operational Forum chaired by one of the Shareholder councils. The Publica Board now comprises of three executive directors and five non-executive directors, of which two are council officers collectively nominated by the shareholders.

A key focus of the Operational Forum through the life of this plan will be reviewing Publica performance and projects that will be delivered in the run up to LGR. The forum provides a platform for shareholders to explore our service performance and delivery in greater depth, complementing the current arrangements through council committees. The new governance structure is set out below.



5. Delivering council priorities and effective core services

Delivering council priorities

Shareholder councils have ambitious plans to deliver their local priorities. We are committed to delivering key projects with the shareholder councils, being flexible and agile to emerging priorities, and realising the benefits for local communities. Increasingly the focus will be on delivering legacy projects, which provide a lasting benefit for communities, in advance of the LGR transition.

The key projects that we will deliver for shareholder councils are as follows:

Communities and Economy

- Delivery of car parking and public convenience strategies to maximise the benefits these assets provide and ensure they are of good quality and meet the needs of local residents and visitors.
- Supporting local business and residents through review of Hackney Carriage and Private Hire policies.
- Supporting local communities to build their resilience so they can respond effectively to emergencies.

Housing and Wellbeing

- The Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) project identifies residents that may be in financial hardship and need support. We have already supported residents to secure benefits with a lifetime impact of £421,000 and the next two years will build on the early success of the project.
- Supporting changes required for compliance with The Renters Rights Act including enforcing the new tenancy system and using strengthened enforcement powers through our regulatory teams in Housing and Environmental Health.
- Acquiring new properties to provide emergency accommodation in areas of high demand, to improve the living standards for those requiring support and reduce the costs for the councils.

Modern Services

- Three technology programmes, exploring AI, spatial data and improving the partnership ERP system.
- Tackling underperformance in key areas by embedding process redesign and continuous improvement so that services remain responsive, efficient, and fit for the future. This includes improving a number of frontline services delivered by Publica over the lifespan of this plan.
- Supporting improvements to our procurement processes and tools to enhance transparency, reduce financial risk, and ensure more efficient, compliant procurement activity. Strengthening financial control by ensuring all spending is pre-approved, reducing the risk of unauthorised or inaccurate payments.
- Providing well supported and managed placements for apprentices and T-Level students to support young people seeking employment in the districts and provide a pipeline of candidates for future vacancies.

Environment

- Supporting our business waste customers by helping them comply with Simpler Recycling requirements while making the process as straightforward as possible. Offering practical advice and responsive customer support to ensure businesses can manage their waste efficiently, reduce costs, and maximise environmental benefits.
- Digitising Food Health and Safety forms and strengthening document retention policies to reduce the associated environmental footprint, lowering waste and energy use and helping create a more sustainable and efficient service.
- Enhancing our environmental crime capabilities to tackle fly tipping incidents.

Our Core Service Offer

Customer services and the safe, secure technology that supports their delivery are the fundamental building blocks of everything Publica does. We believe that by designing simple, effective and value for money services, which are digitally enabled, we can ensure residents and businesses receive consistently good interactions

Customer Services

Delivering high quality, customer focused, services for residents is at the heart of everything Publica does. Customer needs and behaviours continue to change significantly, meaning the way in which we interact needs to continually evolve. Our promise to provide customers with prompt, high quality, easily accessible services remains as relevant as ever:

We have continually improved customer services to meet our strategic commitments to residents. This is borne out by the very high levels of customer satisfaction in relation to face-to-face and telephone interactions. As we continue to evolve, our work is focused on ensuring that customers have consistently good interactions throughout their entire journey with us.

Our current approach builds upon the successes in the front office but has a greater focus on back-office customer experience. This will provide more consistency for customers, reduce the need for repeat contacts, and provide a better overall experience by:

- Improving digital access with a focus on self-service
- Exploring automation of simpler tasks
- Optimising processes through redesign, to take advantage of modern technology.
- Make more data-led decisions
- Plan the workforce around the customer

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Services and Cyber Security

Our technology and the teams that support it are the foundation of everything we deliver to support council services and residents. Continued investment by the councils has enabled us to do this safely and successfully. Our unified architecture across multiple organisations means that we can provide greater proportional value without increasing costs.

Every working day, our team enables around 1,800 people to log in and access the systems necessary for delivering council services. The ICT teams ensure that business systems remain accessible at all times from any location and to introduce new services and strengthen integration between business systems, residents and strategic partners.

The Cyber Security team leverages innovative technology, including AI and automation, to monitor and safeguard all of our operations, ensuring we are safe by design and default.

Over the coming years we will continue to evolve with three technology programmes designed to support the current and future needs of the councils. The programmes include projects such as laptop replacements, Cloud migrations of data and business systems, enabling existing systems with AI capabilities, implementing UK Government sponsored technologies, and implementing new data standards.

Just as our core Customer, ICT and Cyber support services form the basic building blocks underpinning service delivery, Publica also delivers a range of fundamental, front line, shared services that provide value to residents, businesses and communities. Some of the key services include:

Revenues

The service collects local taxation across 141,000 Council Tax accounts and almost 17,000 Business Rate accounts collecting around £280m in Council Tax and almost £100m in Business Rates per annum. Within this the service assesses the eligibility for discounts and exemptions for households and businesses and is responsible for the recovery of debts, up to and including representing the councils in court.

Benefits

A shared service team dealing with over 17,000 Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims. The service processes circa 65,000 changes per annum to these claims and provides vital, time critical, support to some of our most vulnerable residents. The team also delivers the Low Income Family Tracker campaigns which support struggling households.

Housing Allocations

This team manages a total waiting list of circa 5,500 housing applications. Operating a Choice Based Lettings system and working closely with registered housing providers and private landlords, the team help residents to take advantage of a broad range of housing options.

Homelessness

Supporting the most vulnerable members of our communities, the team seeks to prevent homelessness. Where this cannot be avoided they seek to secure suitable emergency accommodation and subsequently an appropriate and permanent home.

Environmental and Regulatory Services

This service has a broad scope, including Environmental Protection, Food Health and Safety, in addition to Licensing. Services ensure that land, air, water and noise pollution is effectively regulated, alongside housing and envirocrime enforcement. Teams ensure businesses operate safely and hygienically. The Licensing team review and regulate a wide variety of premises and activities, supporting license applicants to understand the boundaries of their license.

Service Support

A multi-purpose service providing support to many services within Publica and the councils, whilst also delivering key services such as Disabled Facilities Grants and planning administration.

Transactional Finance, Insurance and Procurement

The exchequer, accounts receivable, and accounts payable services manage the day to day transactional financial services for the councils. The insurance service manages the insurance contract for the four partner councils and Ubico, managing claims and premiums and liaising with the broker. The procurement team provides advice and guidance to all services on the commissioning and procurement of contracts for works and services, ensuring the partners remain compliant and achieve good value.

Paid for Products

Management of a range of commercial products that deliver over £5.6m revenue back to the councils, ranging from Green Waste licensing to grounds maintenance and bulky waste services.

Car Parking

Managing parking services across car parks owned and managed by three of our councils, they provide parking enforcement, management of Parking Charge Notices, issue of permits and management of income collection. They also manage Public Conveniences and the cleaning, cash collection and pay and display machines contracts that support these services.

Emergency Planning

Working with multi-agency partners this team supports locality duty officers, rest centre and coordination team managers through training and advice to ensure they can respond effectively in an emergency. They manage the preparation and testing of Business Impact Assessments and Business Continuity Plans reducing the risk of service disruption in the event of a challenge threatening normal operations.

Recruitment and Learning & Development

Providing a full end to end recruitment service for our shareholders and third-parties, and learning and development across the partnership.

HR & Payroll

Managing the full employee lifecycle from recruitment to payroll this team supports a number of our councils and third parties.

6. Preparing for the Future

Our shareholder councils will know the size and shape of the new unitary councils in the summer of 2026 and this will give some certainty to employees who will transfer to the new councils upon vesting in April 2028. The future of Publica will remain uncertain for a longer period and may not be clear until after the new shadow councils are formed.

A decision could include retention of Publica to provide services to the new councils or closing the company on or before vesting day. With links with Ubico, Publica already has a footprint which extends across the whole of Gloucestershire, and this will create opportunities for discussions as the new landscape emerges. However, Publica must prepare for all possible outcomes.

A key focus over the life of this business plan will be to implement people focused strategies to retain high quality people by preparing and supporting them in readiness for LGR.

To do this we will align services and people to the new unitary councils. Should the decision be made to close Publica, this work will ensure that people retained within Publica are treated fairly and their employment is protected, whilst also giving the opportunity to mitigate cost increases to councils.

Over the next two years we will deliver the following workstreams with shareholders:

Year 1

- Support the councils as they work towards the establishment of new unitary councils by being part of the LGR programmes for both Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, bringing our skills and expertise to the benefit of the individual work programmes.
- Implement people focused strategies with the aim to retain high quality people by preparing for the future and providing support in readiness for LGR.
- Deliver in-depth reviews of our service provision to help understand the future options for the partnership, including the benefits, risks and costs of each option. Where there is an in-year change (where the service area moves back to the Council) this will be reported by the individual council through regular quarterly reporting. The table below sets out the programme of work to achieve this.

Description	FTE	Priority
Corporate Support	8.2	1
DFGs /Safeguarding/Refugees	7.7	1
Flood Defence and Land Drainage	6.0	1
Local Land Charges	2.9	1
Car Parks - Off Street	11.6	2
Homelessness	30.9	2
Human Resources	12.9	2
Environmental Regulatory Services (ERS)	30.1	2
Health & Safety	1.2	2
ICT	51.5	2
Housing and Welfare Benefits	23.1	3
Council Tax/NNDR Collection	26.1	3
Licensing	8.0	3
Reception/Customer Services	34.6	3
Payroll	4.0	3
Training Talent and Recruitment	8.5	3
Procurement	3.7	3
Insurances	2.0	3
Services Support Team	24.3	3
Finance, Transactional / Treasury / Creditors / Debtors	21.7	3
Resources Data Performance and Growth	14.0	3
Planning Validation- Service Management and Support	16.4	3

Year 2

- Agree the options for future service delivery with our shareholders and the shadow councils and then implement those outcomes ready for Vesting Day.
- Support the implementation of the new councils through the relevant workstreams including the transfer of any appropriate staff from the existing councils and Publica.

7. Finance and Risk

Publica was established by the shareholder councils in 2017 with a business case to deliver £2.3m of annual shared service savings through the company by 2028 with cumulative cash savings of £18m by the same date. Tracking of the savings post the Publica Review is now more difficult however, using the same principles established since 2017, the annual shared service savings have reached £4.1m and cumulative cash savings £30.6m if the proposed budget is delivered in 2026/27.

	2025/26 Approved Base	Movement	Revised 2025/26 Base	2026/27 Base
	£000s	£000s	£000s	£000s
Sales				
Contract Income	**21,731**	**(2,681)**	**19,050**	**19,792**
Direct Costs:				
Salaries (Inc. on-costs)	18,532	(1,918)	16,614	17,376
Agency Costs	30	0	30	30
Employee Transport and Travel	115	0	115	105
Other Staff costs	514	0	514	476
Gross Surplus	**2,540**	**(763)**	**1,777**	**1,805**
Administration Expenses	1,567	(635)	932	931
Operating Surplus	**973**	**(128)**	**845**	**874**
Net Interest (Payable)/ Receivable	76	0	76	91
Surplus	**1,049**	**(128)**	**921**	**965**
Tax	14	0	14	23
Contract Fee Refund	1,035	(128)	907	942
Retained Surplus	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**

Three Year Forecast

This strategy extends beyond the timeframe for LGR implementation and therefore is very dependent upon decisions made in respect of Publica contracts as part of that implementation.

	2025/26 Base Year	2026/27 Year 1	2027/28 Year 2	2028/29 Year 3
	£000s	£000s	£000s	£000s
Sales				
Contract Income	**19,050**	**19,792**	**20,397**	**21,016**
Direct Costs:				
Salaries (Inc. on-costs)	16,614	17,376	17,897	18,434
Agency Costs	30	30	31	32
Employee Transport & Travel	115	105	108	111
Other Staff costs	514	476	490	505
Gross Surplus	**1,777**	**1,805**	**1,871**	**1,934**
Administration Expenses	932	931	959	988
Operating Surplus	**845**	**874**	**912**	**946**
Net Interest (Payable)/ Receivable	76	91	79	73
Surplus	**921**	**965**	**991**	**1019**
Tax	14	23	20	18
Contract Fee Refund	907	942	971	1,001
Retained Surplus	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**

Risk Management

Publica maintains a strategic risk register which is considered regularly by its management team and the Audit and Risk Committee. This makes sure that we effectively manage the most critical risks facing Publica and its shareholders, whilst also continually scanning the horizon for emerging risks and opportunities. The key strategic risks for Publica are:

- Changes to the local government finance regime upon the shareholder councils financial standing
- Impact of Local Government Reorganisation on our shareholding councils and therefore Publica
- Recruitment and retention particularly in light of Local Government Reorganisation
- Continued risks in respect of cyber security

There remains an opportunity that any emerging unitary authorities may wish to adopt the 'Teckal' model of service provision particularly as Publica has an established track record of successfully bringing together services from multiple councils and creating a shared resilient and cost effective service. This could provide an opportunity for an expansion of service provision.

8. Performance Management Framework

Publica and the shareholder councils have made significant progress in becoming more data-driven and data-mature organisations, strengthening their ability to deliver modern, effective services for residents. Over the past year we have transformed our performance and improvement capabilities, building a seamless pathway from performance insight to enhanced service delivery.

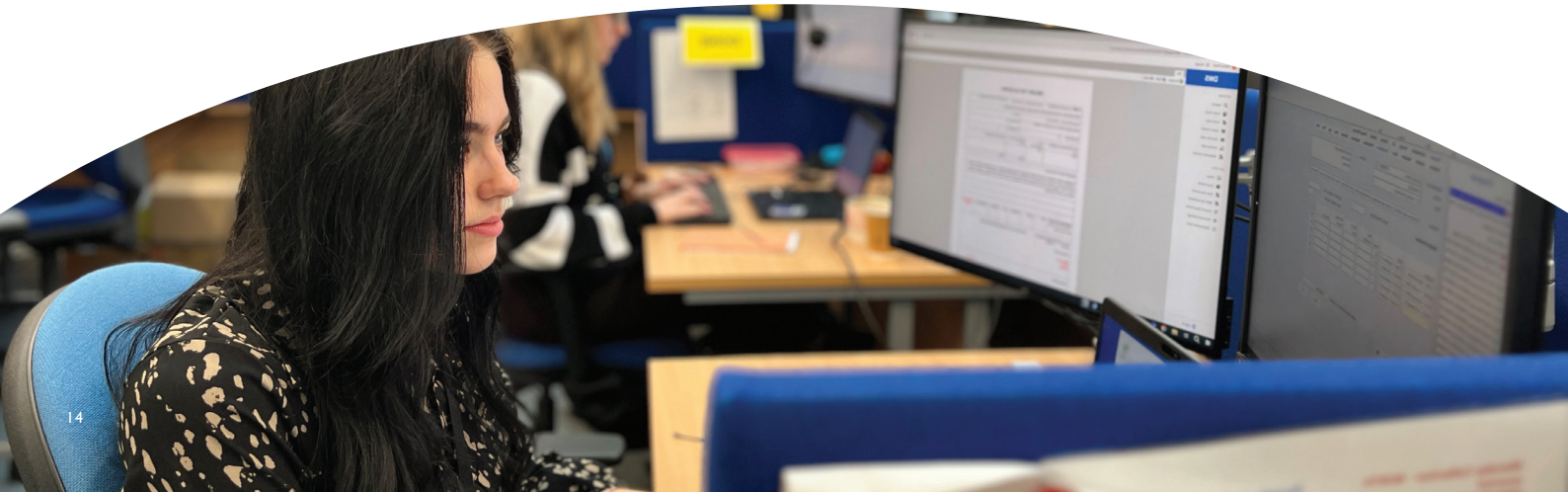
By ensuring that all partnership performance frameworks clearly highlight when performance is off-target at an early stage, we are able to trigger targeted interventions to support improvement and recovery.

At a practical level, strengthening our business partnering capability over the lifespan of this plan will build on existing work to embed a culture of insight, with managers and teams increasingly using data proactively to inform decisions.

As we move towards LGR, we are placing an increased emphasis on strengthening insight and performance across the full range of services delivered by Publica and the partnership. This will ensure that teams are fully supported to maintain high-quality delivery and that all services are handed over in a strong and stable position on Vesting Day. Our priority will be those services included within the corporate KPI suite, as these represent the areas of greatest impact for our residents and businesses.

The corporate KPI suite includes reporting on:

- Revenue Collection and Benefits Processing
- Customer Satisfaction
- Land Charge searches
- Long Term Empty Properties
- Housing and Homelessness
- Environmental investigation and enforcement
- High risks investigated within target timescales
- Customer contact (complaints, FOI, EIR etc.) responded to within target timescales
- Percentage of invoices paid within 30 days
- Server uptime and IT service request/incident response times
- Organisational Health including sickness, attrition and health and safety incidents.
- Financial Performance, payroll accuracy



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