



COTSWOLD
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Productivity Plan

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Background

The 2024/25 Local Government Finance Settlement (Final) published on 05 February 2024 asked local authorities to develop and share productivity plans as part of the government's efforts to return the sector to sustainability in the future.

The Minister for Local Government wrote to Council Chief Executives in April 2024 outlining in more detail.

“Productivity is not one-dimensional, and I would encourage you to consider the various facets the drive for greater efficiency. When developing your plans, please think broadly and include reference to not only how you run your organisation, but also how you run the public services you provide and how you provide place leadership.”

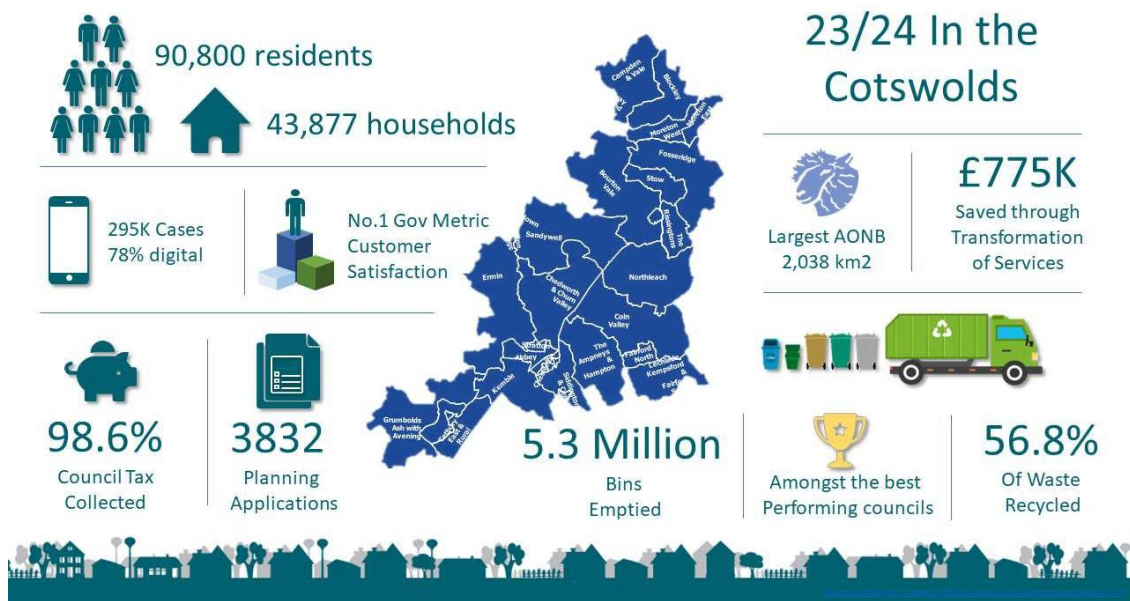
It is for each Council to determine the composition and balance of their productivity plan – there is no formal template or detailed criteria to meet. Plans are expected to be concise (3- 4 pages) and set out what the Council has done in recent years alongside current plans to transform the organisation and services.

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About the Council

Cotswold District Council sits at the heart of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - one of the most beautiful parts of the country, as proven by its popularity as a visitor destination. The district is an attractive area to live, with many second or holiday homes. The area has high property prices and affordability of housing has been an issue for some years.

The population is approximately 90,800, which given its size of 450 square miles and its largely rural character means that there is a low density of population which in turn affects the costs of providing services. The district also has an ageing population and has the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over in the County. People living in Cotswold District are more likely to experience a good quality of life than elsewhere in Britain. Many parts of the district are in the least deprived 20% in England, with no parts in the most deprived 20%.



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Our Cotswolds Our Plan

In January 2024, the Council adopted the [Our Cotswolds Our Plan 2024-2028](#) which sets out the priorities for Cotswold District Council for the next four years.

Our Ambition is “To tackle some of the big challenges faced by our residents while providing a good level of services”.

Our Plan outlines what the Council will do to provide more genuinely affordable housing, facilitate the creation of high-quality jobs and better support our communities recognising the cost-of-living crisis and the difficulties many residents find themselves in. If the Council can make progress in these three areas, then the health and well-being of our residents will improve. Our commitment to tackling the climate and biodiversity emergency will underpin all our work.

Our five priorities which underpin our plan are:

- Delivering Good Services
- Responding to the Climate Emergency
- Delivering Housing
- Supporting Communities
- Supporting the Economy

The Council has published other plans and strategies that support the priorities outlined above:

- In response to the climate emergency the Council declared in July 2019 the Council approved the [Climate Emergency Strategy 2020 to 2030](#)
- In July 2020 the Council declared an ecological emergency and produced an [Ecological Emergency Action Plan](#)
- The Council’s [Green Economic Growth Strategy](#) is part of the Council’s commitment to supporting business and growing the local economy in a sustainable way.
- The Council is currently updating its [Local Plan](#) which was adopted in August 2018. Further information on the Local Plan update process and consultation is published on the Council’s website: <https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/local-plan-update-and-supporting-information/>

Since 2020, the Council has put additional resources into economic development to help improve engagement with business and grow the local economy. The Council adopted its [Green Economic Growth Strategy](#) in December 2020 and liaises closely with key businesses in the district including [ZeroAvia](#), [Campden BRI](#), [St James’s Place](#), and the [Fire Service College](#), as well as other stakeholders.

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Innovative Service Delivery

- The Council delivers some services directly with the majority of services currently delivered through wholly owned Teckal companies (Publica and Ubico) and other partnerships covering Counter Fraud and Internal Audit services.
- [Publica](#) is a not-for-profit Teckal company owned by Cotswold, Forest of Dean, and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Cheltenham Borough Council. The councils work together through Publica to share skills and resources which enables the Councils and Publica to deliver more for local communities, residents, and businesses.
- [Ubico](#) is an environmental services Teckal company, wholly owned by, and providing services for its local authority shareholders. (2022/23 Turnover £49.8m)
- The Counter Fraud and Enforcement Unit works in partnership with Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Borough Councils and Cotswold, Forest of Dean, Stroud, and West Oxfordshire District Councils.
- The [South West Audit Partnership](#) (SWAP) is a not-for-profit TECKAL organisation providing internal audit services and is the largest partnership of its type in England and Wales. There are currently 22 partners (including district, borough, and unitary councils, police, and police and crime commissioners.)
- Legal Services are provided under a shared service arrangement (Cotswold, Forest of Dean, West Oxfordshire) with specialist legal knowledge and expertise available to all partner Councils.

1. How you have transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources

The Council is committed to providing residents with services that provide value for money and high standards with a focus on maintaining financial sustainability.

Transforming Council services, whether delivered by the Council or through our partners, is essential. The Council is in a sound financial position currently due to decisions in the last few years to raise charges and make services more efficient.

Recognised role for Transformation Service Delivery at Cabinet Level

The Cabinet member for Economy and Council Transformation takes the lead for this policy area with the following key portfolio responsibilities:

- Business transformation
- Local Enterprise Partnership and county-wide partnerships
- Economic development
- Tourism and visitor information centres
- Chamber of Commerce liaison
- Customer experience and channel shift

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Bespoke Transformation Board

As part of the ongoing requirement to meet the financial challenge, a Cabinet Transform Working Group (CTWG) was established in March 2023 as part of the strategy to mitigate the forecast financial challenge over the MTFS period.

The purpose of the CTWG is to oversee, shape, and hold to account Cotswold District Council (CDC), Publica, and Ubico officers in relation to 'transformation' activity across the Council, predominately ensuring that service improvements and savings are delivered in line with the Corporate Strategy and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The Group is tasked to receive updates on progress against the Council's Savings and Transformation programme (including Publica and Ubico savings and efficiencies targets) as part of an ongoing strategy to mitigate any forecast adverse financial position.

Cabinet adopted the Asset Management Strategy at their meeting in May 2024 with key strategic issues on the Council's assets being considered by a 'Strategic Estates Board' (SEB) within the existing Cabinet Transform Working Group (CTWG). This group will ensure that the recommendations, principles, and actions from the strategy are discussed, developed, and implemented.

CTWG have overseen and supported the following efficiency and transformation items which were incorporated into the 2024/25 budget and will be delivered during the financial year.

- Waste & Recycling Collections – Implemented as part of the Council's commitment to deliver greater efficiency within its waste and recycling service and cost-savings to the taxpayer, the changes mean over 26,000 households will now have a new waste collection day or week, or both, from the week commencing 24 June 2024. A reduction in cost of £0.500m in a full year arises from these changes.
- Streets Service Cost Efficiencies – Working in partnership with Publica and Ubico, a Streets Service optimisation will be completed in September 2024 which will provide ongoing full-year cost efficiencies of £0.150m increasing to £0.300m in the second year.
- Customer Services – Following the roll-out of new and improved digital solutions for residents and customers, the volume of telephone calls into Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council has reduced by 37% in the three years (2021 to 2023) with digital engagement increasing by 350% over the same period. This transformation allowed for an initial six-month trial of reducing call centre hours to reflect demand which following review is a permanent service change. This has delivered efficiency savings of £0.125m whilst maintaining customer satisfaction.

Proposal to in-house service delivery

The Council will be implementing changes to the way services are delivered following recommendations made in the October 2022 Peer Review and subsequent reports from Human Engine (November 2023) and Local Partnerships (March 2024). This will bring the

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majority of Council services back in-house and will enable the Council to improve responsiveness and democratic accountability. Whilst there will be cost pressures arising from bringing services back in-house, there are significant future benefits:

- A more focused and defined approach to driving each council's priorities through their corporate plan strategies.
- Provides greater clarity on the performance and value for money of services and how it can be more clearly defined and measured.
- Facilitates financial sustainability over the longer term with the council setting direction on service delivery and resource prioritisation.
- Allows the Council to group services to accelerate efficiencies, by identifying synergies between certain services before moving and re-defining services.
- Focus on a commercial mindset when considering engagement with businesses, residents, and key stakeholders, ensuring a cost recovery approach is implemented whenever possible to maximise service efficiencies.

Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council are exploring shared service options.

2. How you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

The Council has an ongoing programme of improvement around the use of data and technology with data informing performance improvements through dashboards to support strategic decision making and operational management. With the establishment of Oflog, the Council will align its data and performance reporting to ensure a single and consistent dataset is reported to members and other decision-makers.

Over the coming financial year, the Council will be investing in technology to improve decision-making, service design, and use of resources:

- Investment in Microsoft Modern Workspace (Microsoft 365 and Windows operating systems upgrades) to ensure the full value of licences is obtained. Over the next 12 months, the programme will improve data workflows, enhance data protection and security, and enable the Council to deploy Microsoft AI (ChatGPT) where appropriate to improve service efficiency.
- Investment in 'in-cab' technology (Alloy) that has supported the rezoning of the waste and recycling rounds. A further investment of £60k was agreed as part of the 2024/25 capital programme to roll out the technology to the Street Cleansing and Ground Maintenance services.

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This builds upon recent investment, examples of which are provided below:

- Work as part of the Government PropTech Innovation Fund. Alongside West Oxfordshire District Council, the Council developed an 'Artificial Intelligence tool' that saved a considerable amount of officer time, making the Local Plan process much more efficient while also increasing community engagement. (Proptech funding of over £450,000 allocated to Cotswold and West Oxfordshire councils).
- Improvements to the Council's website, creating new forms and online routes for residents to access our services quickly and easily. For example, 89% the annual renewal of Garden Waste licences is completed through the Council's website using on-line forms (over 20,000 of the 23,000 licence renewals)
- As indicated earlier in section 2, the roll-out of new and improved digital solutions for residents and customers, the volume of telephone calls into Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council has reduced by 37% in the three years (2021 to 2023) with digital engagement increasing by 350% over the same period. This transformation allowed for an initial six-month trial of reducing call centre hours to reflect demand which following review is a permanent service change. This has delivered efficiency savings of £0.125m whilst maintaining customer satisfaction.

3. Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems.

The Council has already taken several decisions in the last few years to make services more efficient but there will always be more the Council can do.

Examples of how the Council has reduced wasteful spend include:

- Commissioning and Procurement Board identifies opportunities to share procurement and take advantage of economies of scale. The Board meet every quarter to review and challenge the way goods and services are commissioned, to ensure the most effective approach and route to market are used.
- Working in partnership with a local serviced office Provider to let out surplus office space following work to consolidate the Council's office space required for staff and a programme of improvements and refurbishments. This approach will enable mitigation of the day-to-day running costs of the offices and over time provide an income stream to the Council.
- Crowdfund Cotswold is an online community crowdfunding platform, where residents, local businesses, the council, and other organisations can all pledge money alongside each other to crowdfund projects that improve their neighbourhoods. It was launched in 2021 by Cotswold District Council in partnership with Spacehive. This has enabled the Council to direct resources to key community-based projects and provided a sustainable platform for community empowerment and organisational transformation.
- The Council's approach to equality impact assessments. There is no dedicated Equality &

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Diversity post holder yet there is an established culture of inclusion and diversity across the organisation and its partners ensuring legal requirements against the Public Sector Equality Duty are met.

- The Council, through Publica, does not incur significant agency worker or consultancy expenditure. In the last financial year (2023/24) Publica reported an underspend of £1.8m on staff budgets with £0.9m of expenditure on agency staff. An effective resources management and robust authority to fill process is in place with agency staff engagement limited to essential posts to ensure service delivery.
- The Council has effective governance and systems and processes in place to ensure value for money for residents. This is evidenced in the Auditor's annual reports for 2021/22 and 2022/23 which sets out their opinion on the arrangements the Council has in place to secure value for money ([2021/22 report](#) and [2022/23 report](#))

4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.

There are several ways that the government could remove barriers that prevent local government from improving productivity further, improving services, and maintaining financial sustainability.

Engagement with Government

The Council values the support and dialogue from our Southwest MHCLG representatives and would encourage other government departments such as DEFRA or HM Treasury to liaise closely with MHCLG colleagues.

Financial Barriers

- Move to multi-year financial settlements which would allow the Council to plan for the longer-term.
- More active engagement and meaningful consultation with local authorities on funding reforms - aligned to the next spending review period, local government is provided with a clear roadmap of when reforms to local government finance are to be implemented (i.e., Business Rates Retention, Fair Funding Review)
- Move away from competitive bid-based funding across government departments. This approach requires the Council to commit its limited resources to prepare submission and brings funding uncertainty. The timescales and format for each government department differs, and the criterion for award is often unclear at the point of submission.
- Increased flexibility regarding ring-fenced grants and more generally across grant conditions. Too often, the Council must provide significant evidence of outcomes and expenditure, little or no scope for rollover of unspent funding where doing so would deliver improved outcomes.

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- Council Tax referendum limits are reviewed to ensure that local authorities can raise sufficient additional funds to meet their statutory obligations. Cumulative inflation (CPI, April 2020 to March 2023) 18.8% with the referendum limit for Shire Districts being no more than 2.99% per annum. Over the financial years 2018/19 through 2024/25, the cumulative referendum limit for Shire Districts is £35 which compares unfavourably with the limit for the Police and Crime Commissioner of £99 over the same period.
- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) reforms are due to be implemented in 2025. The impact on local authorities is unclear and ask that the government provide information as soon as possible (and ideally prior to Councils setting budgets for 2025/26) on the potential income and service delivery obligations.

Barriers – Climate Change

- Climate Change (impact of extreme weather) – flooding, and sewage issues across the district which adversely affect residents and businesses with little direct action the district council can take. Whilst the Council works closely with partners (County Council, Water Companies, Environment Agency) this is a policy area that can be improved on. Greater effort is put into Government policies for climate change that enable the Council to work in partnership with other agencies.
- Climate Change (Net Zero) – In common with most Councils, the District Council declared a climate emergency in July 2019 and in July 2020 the Council declared an ecological emergency and has produced Climate and Ecological action plans. To date, there has not been sufficient recognition of the economic cost of mitigating these impacts through government funding. The Council asks the government to consider funding Councils to deliver longer-term investment in their areas to help achieve net zero and the Government must commit to providing Councils with greater long-term funding to achieve net zero targets.

Barriers – Housing delivery

- Housing delivery and affordable housing – with the Cotswold District amongst the most expensive areas to buy a house, there is an acute shortage of affordable housing. The Council is committed to delivering more affordable units and would ask the government to help through changes to the planning system. A study from Hopkin Homes published in July 2024 placed the Cotswold District as the 5th most expensive area (out of 325 local authority areas assessed). According to the study, the average house price is £499,606, and a house price-to-earnings ratio of 8.59. House prices have surged by 7.52 percent since 2020, with couples earning a median annual income of £58,146 (<https://www.hopkinshomes.co.uk/2024-property-hotspots/>)
- Review of the Right to Buy policy. The current policy provides generous incentives to tenants to acquire their social housing but there is a significant detrimental impact on the local authority – both in terms of a reduction in the available stock but also the net receipts that are available to build new social housing.

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- The government needs to provide help to stalled development sites and provide funding to assist with delivering infrastructure to release sites.
- To assist all local authorities, provide national standard templates or draft text for legal agreements that authorities and developers can use to reduce the length of time spent negotiating and national planning policies on affordable housing.
- Implementing policy that provides a mechanism to expedite the planning approval process for affordable housing such as granting Permission in Principle or a Local Development Order.

Demographic impact

- Demography – Data from the 2011 and 2021 Census shows an increase of 28.2% in people aged 65 years and over compared to the national average increase of 20.1%. The overall composition of residents is more weighted towards those aged 50 and over than other district areas.

