

Cherwell District Council Productivity Plan – July 2024

Simon Hoare, the Minister for Local Government wrote to Cherwell District Council on 16 April requesting that our Productivity Plan was returned by 19 July 2024. Minister Hoare outlined a number of themes and questions that he has asked the Council to consider when preparing this Productivity Plan.

In response to all of the questions asked by the Government, the council defines savings as both net reductions in expenditure and net increases in income levels achieved.

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

1. How has the organisation changed in recent years to become more productive? You may wish to consider what you have done around staffing, structures, operating models etc.
 - 2022 New senior management structure agreed including an Assistant Director to lead on organisational transformation
 - 2023 Transformation strategy agreed, resources in place including Transformation Programme Manager/team and budget of £2m
 - 2024 First services to go through transformation programme

Savings plans for the last 3 years can be found here:

- [2022/23](#)
- [2023/24](#)
- [2024/25](#)

2. How do you measure productivity in your organisation?

As with all councils we are subject to a value for money assessment as part of our annual external audit. The latest external assessment (for 2021/22) with the conclusion that the council had proper arrangements in place. The council does not anticipate any change in this assessment for the 2022/23 assessment or later years.

The council operates an annual budget process. As part of this, all services are required to consider what savings proposals can be put forward. The process for 2024/25 identified both efficiency and savings that were included in the budget. For the 2025/26 process the council intends to enhance and develop this process to ensure that identifying detailed efficiencies and new ways of working is entrenched into the culture of the organisation.

By operating in this way and asking all services to identify additional efficiencies each year, the council is able to ensure that its levels of productivity increase each year.

3. What changes have you made to improve services, and what effects have those had?

The council has made numerous changes to improve services. One such case study focuses on the Revenues and Benefits Service.

Area	Action	Outcome	Benefit	frequency
Rent increases (yearly)	Format rent file for uploading into Benefits System and assess via mass calculation	1000's of assessment done automatically in 1 action	100's of staff hours (cost)	yearly
System reports	Overlaid the information from 7 different reports linked via case reference. Officer works on overlaid report and pick up multiple changes through working on the overlaid report at the same time.	Reduced items to review from 1000's to an average of 100 per week. Endorsing "the right decision at the right time and right award of benefit"	100's of staff hours (cost). Reduction/Elimination of Admin delay/Local Authority admin errors	Weekly
Universal Credit Data Share /Automatic Transfer Local Authority System automation	Through DWP data sharing automation of change events done via one mass calculation	1000's of change events done in 1 action. Improved speed of processing times. Customer satisfaction. Massively reduced complaints. Fewer appeals.	100's of staff hours (cost) Reduction/Elimination of Admin delay/Local Authority admin errors	Daily
End-2-End working (officer sheets)	Officer deals with a case from beginning to end, pulling all outstanding processes to themselves ensuring the right decision at the right time and the right award of benefit	Improved speed of processing times. Greater knowledge, accountability and accuracy of processing cases	Reduction in avoidable contacts resulting in additional staff hours to review claims	Daily
Enterprise routing	Documents are automatically routed to the officer that last looked at a claim within the calendar month.	Improved speed of processing times. Customer satisfaction. Massively reduced complaints. Fewer appeals. Minimises hands on. Reduces the unnecessary	Reduced administrative tasks as no longer a need to allocate work items to the team	Daily

Area	Action	Outcome	Benefit	frequency
	Work types assigned level of priority based on importance and officers will receive the highest priority work item first through automatic work allocation	movement of documents. Ensures the right officer deals with the item		
Online Housing Benefit Accuracy Assurance forms	Customers complete an online form and upload evidence which is then routed to a dedicated inbox	559 forms received without the need for each to be individually scanned and indexed by the post team	Reduced staff hours spent on scanning and indexing. No postal expenditure for the authority/customer. No printing costs	Monthly
Training	Knowledge bar. One stop shop of all training slides, reference material and 'how to guides'	Upskilled staff with all training knowledge available to them instantly	Reduction in outsourced training sessions	Ad hoc
Online claim forms and Risk Based Verification	Customers can complete an online form and upload evidence which is then routed to a dedicated case manager. The customer receives an acknowledgement email response and will request the required evidences needed to progress the claim specific to them.	Improved speed of processing times. Eliminates lost forms in the post. Information required is requested at source. Requires no manual intervention on initial request	Postal costs Staff hours	Daily
Online billing mailshot	Ahead of annual billing for 2024 - 25 a targeted email campaign was issued to customers email addresses to promote online billing	Reduction in costs for postage , customer has instant access to real time information via customer portal.	Postage costs reductions	Ongoing

Area	Action	Outcome	Benefit	frequency
	<p>and customer portal where a paper bill was still being issued.</p> <p>Outer artwork on envelopes changed to promote portal take up for landlords, businesses , and council tax payers.</p>			

4. What are your current plans for transformation over the next two years and how will you measure the effects of those changes?

- Root and branch review of all services in line with agreed strategy and guiding principles, to define target operating models and pathways to achieving them
- Review of cross cutting activities to identify inefficiencies
- Establish a rolling programme of transformation to ensure services remain fit for purpose, agile and lean

5. Looking ahead, which service has greatest potential for savings if further productivity gains can be found? What do you estimate these savings to be?

Savings can generally occur when significant levels of change occur. As there are major plans for change within Environmental Services as a result of the introduction of the Government's new Extended Producer Responsibility scheme, this would suggest that there could be opportunities for savings – in particular additional income streams due to the council. Furthermore, the council will have to consider the way its services are figured in light of the final structure of the scheme. Environmental Services also has the largest net budget for the council which also implies the greatest potential for the level of productivity gains available. Initial assessments suggest savings of £1.5m - £3m could be achieved.

6. What role could capital spending play in transforming existing services or unlocking new opportunities? If you have already used capital spending to boost growth or improve services, we would be interested in learning more.

The Council has budgeted £700k across two years for its [Digital Futures Programme and Strategy](#). This will look to introduce:

Robotic Process Automation

We are harnessing the power of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) by introducing a software platform consisting of digital workers (robots that replicate human activities). These robots perform repetitive tasks with greater speed, accuracy, and consistency, thereby freeing our workforce from repetitive and monotonous duties. By automating resource-intensive processes, we aim to save both time and money, directly benefiting the Council's efficiency.

Data Lakehouse

In our pursuit to capitalise on data opportunities, we have implemented a data lakehouse to elevate our data analytics capabilities. This initiative integrates both internal and external data sources to enhance service delivery, minimize information redundancy, and enable proactive service provision. With a strong emphasis on data reliability and accuracy, our data governance policies and

procedures are rigorously enforced. We have appointed a data steward to oversee governance and ensure that all data is meticulously cleansed before being loaded into the data lakehouse.

Unified Platform

To unlock the full potential of our data, enrich the customer and user experience, and streamline system integration, we are committed to implementing a unified platform solution. This platform will serve as the foundation for developing future systems and integrating any legacy back-office systems, thereby simplifying our IT infrastructure and modernising our service offerings. This holistic approach will not only enhance operational efficiency but also pave the way for innovative solutions that meet the evolving needs of our community.

Migrate Azure file storage to Microsoft Teams and Sharepoint

We have moved our Azure service area file storage to Microsoft Teams and SharePoint, with the goal of equipping our workforce with modern collaboration tools. This migration will facilitate seamless communication, document sharing, and collaborative work, empowering our staff to operate more efficiently, fostering a more connected and agile workforce better equipped to meet the demands of our dynamic operational landscape.

7. What preventative approaches have you undertaken and can the value of these be quantified?

Cherwell has a track record of thinking laterally and making best use of our resources.

Good examples of this are activities such as the purchase and refurbishment of Town Centre House – a leased block of 40 flats in Banbury Town Centre we had used to provide as move on accommodation for residents who were leaving supported accommodation or had had previous difficulties in their tenancies. Having discovered RAAC in the roof we moved residents out into new accommodation over a period of some months with the intention of replacing the roof and then reletting. The advent of LAHF allowed us to buy the freehold of the building, create two large 4 bed flats and several two bed flats as well as some 1 bed accommodation too. The first tenancy must be to Afghan and Ukrainian families, but we can also use the remaining flats to relieve homelessness. This reduces our reliance on nightly charged budget hotel accommodation and provides self-contained good quality accommodation to residents we have a duty to house. This has led us to look at our stock of accommodation generally and adopt a strategy of using that accommodation for temporary rather than general needs. By using LAHF in this way, we have increased our asset base, increased our stock of temporary housing as well as being able to offer refugees high quality Town centre accommodation at social rents and ensure that the call on the council's revenue budget, beyond the homelessness prevention grant, is under less pressure.

Cherwell has 4 leisure centres, using Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme funds we have been able to reduce the energy consumption of the sites through a mixture of measures, like air source heat pumps, an array of solar therm tubes, photovoltaic car ports and solar panels, and new intelligent LED systems. Not only is this helping to move us towards carbon neutrality, preventing spikes in energy costs and enabling better control of the building lifecycle and maintenance costs but it has allowed us to preserve 4 operational swimming pools and associated sports halls. These are active contributors to improving health outcomes for residents and preventing their ill health and sickness. Our programmes of activity for people with long term health conditions and for families eligible for free school meals have been funded by public health in partnership with the ICB because of the positive impact they have on preventing worsening health outcomes.

The provision of community centres on new developments has meant that Cherwell holds 13 centres and offers them to community associations, at a peppercorn rent, to run them. One piece of work this year for consideration is the creation of a Trust to hold these assets for the good of the residents and consider how a new stewardship approach could be adopted that would enable the trust to apply to trusts and foundations to support that work. These avenues for funding are not currently open to local authorities and given the limitations on our resources we are exploring how we can protect the asset, improve their long-term sustainability and reduce the financial burden on the council.

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

8. What are your existing plans to improve the quality of the data you collect; how do you use it and how do you make it available to residents?

We have a new data lakehouse and when setting up data imports in the new platform we address data quality issue in several ways as part of our wider data import evaluation process. We first review the data we import against our documented standard set of data quality principles. This will highlight any issues and let us look at ways to address these. We will also work with the service area to try and improve their processes & systems to address issues we find.

At a technical level we can apply:

- **Validation routines:** where we check the individual fields to ensure the contents are valid using a set of rules & masks (for example, we can check account numbers are valid, that dates of birth are in the past, telephone number & email addresses are in the correct format, etc.).
- **Referential integrity checks:** where we check the links between various datasets that make up the data import to ensure all the links are valid (for example, where we check that there is a customer record for every customer listed in a list of cases).

- **Data cleansing processes:** we can clean the data up into a standard form and, where possible, add in missing data from other datasets where links can be established (for example, matching an address to the LLPG to pull in property type, ward, co-ordinates, etc.).

These processes run every time data is imported and the data platform logs any issues, so we review the root causes and adapt the above processes accordingly to continuously improve the import process.

Data is typically used to aid reporting, effective governance, strategic planning, service delivery, resource allocation, budgeting and continuous improvement .

We make data available to residents primarily through our website with comprehensive information on Council services, specific areas such as planning applications, public consultations, financial reporting including specific datasets, contract registers, performance data and reports for public meetings. Residents can request specific data not readily available on the website via a Freedom of Information request.

9. Are there particular barriers from legacy systems?

The fundamental barrier from legacy systems is the lack of integration, more standardisation of API's sitting between systems is needed. The second barrier can be the lack of golden record(s) to effectively link the data between one system and another.

10. How often do you share data with other organisations, and do you find this useful?

Where we need Data Sharing Agreements (DSAs) with other organisations these relate to the sharing of personal data about individuals. We have a lot of separate DSAs across a number of public sector and commercial partners.

The council operates its own approved DSA template where the council initiates a DSA, but where the impetus for sharing comes from another other party a lot of work can be required to check that their DSA is suitable for the council to sign up to.

Current legislation does not allow a general DSA across the public sector. It would be useful though to have agreed, standardised DSA templates for use across the public sector.

DSAs with the private sector can be more complex. In order to sign up to a contract the council needs in order to run its services, the council can be required to agree to a standardised DSA that the company uses for all of its contracts. It could be helpful if there were agreed templates that companies on procurement platforms had to use when tendering for local government business.

11. Are there opportunities to use new technology to improve workflows and systems, such as predictive analytics and AI?

Yes, there are many opportunities to firstly review our processes and then use new technology for digital transformation using Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and also Artificial Intelligence (AI).

RPA involves the use of software “bots” to automate repetitive, rule-based tasks, helping reduce manual intervention, minimise errors, and save time.

RPA can be applied to various processes, such as data entry, invoice processing, and customer service.

AI has a wide potential of uses from speeding up finding data for FOI requests to streamlining customer interactions with chatbots.

Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems. You should set out plans to reduce wasteful or “gold-plated” spend.

12. How do you approach identifying and reducing waste in the organisation? How do you monitor progress?

The Council operates a continuous improvement approach. As part of this, the annual budget process requires all services to consider how they can “absorb” pressures identified with the service each year. In addition, all services are required to identify savings and efficiency proposals to be considered by the Council for agreement.

Savings plans for the last 3 years can be found here:

- [2022/23](#)
- [2023/24](#)
- [2024/25](#)

For the 2025/26 budget process, the Council is looking to enhance this process by looking at how services can continue to look for efficiencies, consider what costs would look like at differing levels of service provision and identify cross cutting efficiencies through services adopting new ways of working between each other.

13. Where have you followed invest to save and what was the result?

The council has introduced a gateway process to ensure that all revenue implications are considered for capital projects introduced by the council. This allows the council to fully understand the capital investment costs, the ongoing interest costs and money set aside for debt repayment (MRP) as well as the ongoing service revenue implications. Following implementation, the council’s gateway process requires that a benefits realisation process takes place, which includes whether the financial impacts were realised.

The council has identified a number of photovoltaic invest to save projects. However, they are not complete as yet and so the benefits realisation cannot be confirmed.

14. How much time and money do you spend on staff EDI training (internal and external), networks and other programmes? How many EDI Champions do you have as an organisation? How do you log and report the time and money spent on EDI related activity? How do you assess the effectiveness of training?

- No dedicated EDI resource or EDI champions.
- EDI activity forms part of BAU processes such as service planning, policy development etc.

15. What percentage of total staff budget is spent on

- a. Agency?
- b. Consultants?

How do you assess value for money on agency and consultancy spend and what are your plans to reduce use/costs? How many of these consultants or agency staff have been in place for over a year?

Total agency costs were 13.0% of the 2023/24 staffing budget.

Total consultant costs were 4.1% of the 2023/24 staffing budget.

Agency engagement is currently the responsibility of managers within the Council but we are currently undertaking a process to review usage and explore framework options and preferred arrangements in a bid to achieve best value where usage cannot be avoided.

Of the 43 agency/consultants we had recorded on 31 March 2024 – 15 had been in place for over a year (13 agency and 2 consultants).

16. What governance structures do you use to ensure accountability of spend?

The council adopts both public and private methods of governance to ensure accountability of spend across the organisation.

Public

The council has a number of public meetings in which financial reporting is considered – both revenue and capital. Revenue and Capital Budget Management reports are considered by the Executive for 10 months of the year, including the outturn position. This is a joint performance report so that the Executive is able to consider both performance management and financial management within the same report. The council's Budget Planning Committee considers the council's budget management reports on a quarterly basis. This is the committee that provides the scrutiny function of the council.

Internal

Internally there are significant controls in place with regards to authorising expenditure via the council's financial systems. At the start of the year Assistant Directors must sign off their budgets for the year. Service managers are supported by the finance team to ensure budget forecasts take into consideration all material information and to identify mitigations if the budget forecast is going off track. As part of setting the budget, the S151 Officer, within their [S25 Statement](#) on the robustness of the budget, make it clear how services should manage any overspends forecast in year.

17. Do you share office functions with other councils and if so, how useful do you find this?

The council had previously shared back-office functions with South Northamptonshire District Council and then with Oxfordshire County Council. The council now operates on a stand-alone basis. Business cases were prepared for the council to enter into its partnerships. However, on reflection, a number of the council's functions did not get the full attention required and so the council is now operating more effectively as a "stand-alone" council.

18. If you share external training costs with neighbouring councils, how do you factor out duplications of service between your council and your upper-tier council (if you have one)?

We do not share external training costs with neighbouring councils.

19. If you have one, what is your assessment and experience of working with an elected mayor, combined authority, or devolution deal?

Not applicable.

20. What proportion of your paybill is spent on Trade Union facility time?

Facility time fluctuates based on need but can be up to 20% for on one Union rep and up to 10% for a further 2. Overall cost based on the maximum time is £12,879 excluding on-costs. This is 0.04% of the 2023/24 staffing budget.

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

21. What are the barriers preventing you from improving productivity further within your organisation?

Lack of certainty, clarity and consistency from Government around future approaches and timing of implementation – e.g. weekly food waste collection and Simpler Recycling. This all leads to a paralysis in the service looking to implement changes as it does not know:

- what it will be required to do in the future,
- when it will need to do it and

- if it has made the change in anticipation of future requirements whether funding will be made available to it that will be made available to those that haven't made the change.

Weekly Food Waste

Government has announced that it will **only** provide capital grants for authorities to the extent that have not yet introduced weekly food waste collections. But this means that for those authorities that have previously borrowed to introduce weekly food waste collections, the local council tax payers in these areas are having to repay the borrowing costs rather than them be funded by grant. Government could ensure that all local authorities and council tax payers are treated equally by being provided with capital grants for the implementation costs of nationally required capital schemes.

Simpler Recycling

There is a lack of clarity and certainty around what will be required for Simpler Recycling and when it is going to be introduced. It is not clear how the schemes will work and interact with businesses. This makes it incredibly difficult to plan for how the service will need to look in the future.

22. What are the barriers preventing you from improving services further?

23. Are these barriers consistent across multiple services?

Examples of barriers preventing the council from improving services include:

- Lack of financial certainty
- Lack of overall financial resources relative to the tasks required of local government
- Reduction in local democratic accountability
- Upfront capital costs and associated increases in borrowing costs
- Legislation e.g. requirement of in-person committee meetings rather than virtual.

24. What would you need to remove those barriers? What do you need from Government, the market or elsewhere?

Examples of information that it would be helpful for the Government to provide include:

- **Clarity of requirements of local government and appropriate funding for those levels of service to be provided well.**
- **Multi-Year Settlements** to enable local authorities to plan for the longer term.
- **Stability of financial reforms** – e.g. a “rolling” business rates reset to ensure no significant drops in retained business rates income.
- **Removal of council tax referendum limits** to allow the local electorate determine the level of service they require and if they are unhappy with the level of council tax make a decision at the ballot box.
- Compel DWP to **share their data** to enable more automated processing in areas such as benefit claimants etc.

- Allowing greater **freedom to spend ringfenced grants** to allow more local decision making.
- Stop the '**begging bowl**' culture of bidding for funding.
- Information as soon as possible on the potential income, and obligations, for LAs from **Extended Producer Responsibility (Packaging)** reforms
- **Updated legislation** that allows local authorities to **make the best use of 21st century technology** and hence require less space for its buildings.