



Publica Annual Report: 2023/24 PUBLICA

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Welcome to the Publica Annual Report for 2023/24.

A year of change for the partnership but also one of continued progress.



Frank Wilson
Interim Managing Director



Christine Gore
Chair of the Publica Board

With the councils taking the decision in late 2023 to take some services back in-house, our focus as an organisation and our business plan moved to supporting that transition while also keeping services running and delivering the councils' priorities.

We have been successful we have been successful in that task to date and our service performance has remained largely strong. A lot of the work that started in 2022/23 under the Future Publica programme has come to fruition. We have also continued to see tremendous delivery against the councils' priorities as evidenced in this report.

Our people have continued to show dedication to public service during the transition phase delivering some significant outcomes and benefits for residents. As ever, our people are at the forefront of all we do, and we have worked hard to support them through the changes.

We have continued to see the move to digital services as we transition to modern and effective service offerings. This has allowed us to not only provide a good service (with all our councils ranked top in the country for customer satisfaction) but also make efficiencies to support the councils' financial challenges.

There is further work across the partnership to improve our service delivery over the coming years, as well as adapting to the new ways of working once the transition of services back into the councils is complete. Publica will continue to adapt and improve to deliver high performing services in a cost-effective way for as long as required.

Once again, this report highlights how much of a difference the partner councils are making across their districts through Publica as their company. This report is a celebration of those achievements delivered in partnership through Publica as a wholly owned not for profit organisation.

Delivering a more *efficient* and *effective* Publica

We have continued our improvement and transformation journey in the face of the increasingly challenging financial positions of all four shareholder councils. This is not just financially driven though; it's about providing the most efficient and effective services for our partner councils that ultimately support and improve the lives of the residents we serve.

It is an evolution of the very successful partnership approach that has already delivered £18M of total savings for the councils and many service improvements since Publica was formed.

The implementation of the Publica operating model across the partnership is a continuing effort when applying it across more than 50 different services. Great progress has been made again to improve services and drive efficiency:



Channel Choice: The next step in our sector leading customer service operation

Our Channel Choice programme is the front end of the Publica Operating Model, giving residents what they need at first point of contact and ideally for most people, on a digital, self-service platform. Progress this year shows that the operating model is not only delivering results for our partner councils but also for our residents.

We have again seen more residents using our digital services and the number of people needing to call or visit the councils' customer services in person is decreasing. This enabled us to trial and implement a change in opening hours of our phone lines which has delivered £250,000 in crucial financial savings whilst maintaining a great service.

We are proud that the partner councils to which we provide customer services to rank in the top 10 in the country for customer service satisfaction.

Changing the way we manage our assets

Our councils own significant assets across the partnership including land and property. Managing these assets effectively is crucial to both the councils' financial future and service delivery.

We identified areas where our partner councils could take advantage of our shared service model to both improve the service and deliver savings. At West Oxfordshire, roles were brought into the shared team which had previously been outsourced and we changed our approach to make it more efficient. The changes resulted in a mix of net savings and increased income totalling a benefit of over £90,000 per annum.

Ongoing improvement to Planning Services

In 2021 we launched an improvement programme for our planning services to ensure that they all perform well based on national benchmarking. We proactively addressed the challenges that planning services across the country have faced which include a lack of trained planners, and competition from the private sector making it very hard to recruit. In the lead up to the transition, and in an effort to manage in year budget pressures at Cotswold, we have worked closely with the Chief Executive who has taken a more active role in the service in respect of vacancy management. In 2023/24 our planning service performance delivered:

- Over 90% of major applications decided in time, above the national benchmark. Forest of Dean was joint top in the country with 100%.
- Significant improvement in decision making for non-major decisions compared to 2022/23. West Oxfordshire was in the top quartile for the country with its performance on minor applications rising from 73% in 2020 to 95% now and for other applications from 79% to 98% in time.
- A whole new enforcement process was mapped out starting with digitising the ability of customers to make better complaints that we can act on faster through to streamlining our back-office systems to get matters resolved quicker and keep all parties informed of progress.



Updating our tech to meet modern demands

We have now completed the transition of all our employees onto the Microsoft 365 suite. This change not only opens up the use of Microsoft Teams and other powerful tools for our people but lays a baseline for future improvements such as AI. We delivered this work without the need to bring in expensive consultancy often required by other organisations. The change has also delivered a saving for our partner councils of £75,000 per annum.

Reducing print to save money and our environment

Closing the print room reduced the number of printers available for people to use. Printing has a significant cost both in terms of its carbon footprint but also financially to rent machines and buy consumables like ink and paper. With digital alternatives now regularly used a review was undertaken. These projects have delivered more than more than £50,000 in annual savings along with a reduced environmental impact. We will be continuing the journey of eliminating print where possible and push more effective and environmentally friendly digital alternatives.

£1.3m

We delivered £1.3m of savings in 2023/24 in respect of underlying and one off savings.

Meeting the financial challenges of our partner councils

We are committed to delivering efficiencies to help our partner councils meet their financial challenges after over a decade of austerity, continuing local government funding uncertainty, rapidly increasing delivery costs and high inflation. This has put council finances under significant strain across the country and all our partner councils are forecasting deficits in their Medium-Term Financial Strategies.

Publica has delivered **£3.2M** of underlying annual budget savings since the partnership formed compared to the business plan of **£2M** by this stage. This has allowed the partner councils to avoid the challenging financial decisions many councils across the country have had to make and has enabled them to continue to invest in their local areas and be in a better financial position than many other councils now find themselves.

We continue to drive projects that will make sure services are efficient and delivered at

minimum cost, through initiatives such as waste service round optimisation and through a planned approach to the management of services, such as the development and adoption of Asset Management Strategies.

We remain committed to supporting our partner councils with their savings targets. The delivery of efficiencies is one of our highest priorities and progress is being driven forward at pace by our senior leaders.



Publica financial review of 2023/24

Over the full financial year Publica has met its budget targets. The budget target for 2023/24 incorporated an additional reoccurring savings target of £270k, this has been met together with an additional £911k of one-off (non-recurring) savings.

The financial year has been characterised as largely a return to business as usual but with some additional requirements from central government to support residents in response to the cost-of-living crisis. Additional activities carried out over the year included administering additional residential grant streams in respect of energy and significant work to support refugee and asylum seeker programmes for government.

As a trusted 'not for profit' partner we have sought to pick up most of the additional work within the core contract with variations only being sought where additional expenses were incurred.

Details of spend to budget are set out below.

BUDGET VS ACTUAL 2023/24	Current Budget Q4	Actual / Accrued Q4	(+) / -
SALES	£000s	£000s	£000s
Contract income	31,537	31,537	(0)
DIRECT COSTS			
Salaries (Inc. oncosts)	(27,215)	(25,404)	(1,811)
Agency costs	(30)	(884)	854
Contractor costs	0	(59)	59
Employee transport and travel	(200)	(152)	(48)
Other staff costs	(543)	(649)	106
GROSS SURPLUS	3,549	4,389	(840)
Administration expenses	(2,065)	(2,140)	75
Other operating expenses	(4)	(4)	0
OPERATING SURPLUS	1,480	2,245	(765)
Net interest (payable)/ receivable	26	206	(180)
SURPLUS BEFORE TAX	1,506	2,451	(945)
Tax	(5)	(50)	45
Contract fee refund	(1,501)	(1,501)	0
RETAINED SURPLUS	0	11	-11
Additional surplus / (deficit) distribution	0	911	(911)

Bringing in external funding

During 2023/24 Publica colleagues worked together with partner Councils to identify and access additional external funding to support delivery of new projects. Most notably, third party funding has been secured for:

Forest Fast Followers funded by Innovate UK as part of the National £60m Net Zero Living Programme	£300K
Community Climate Action funded by Thirty Percy	£250K

Our performance of key services across the year

PLANNING

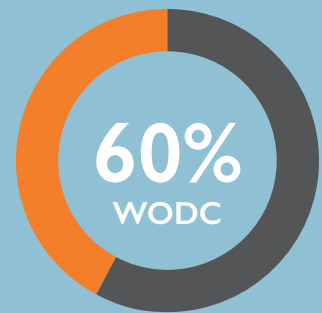
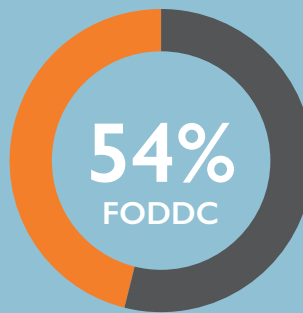
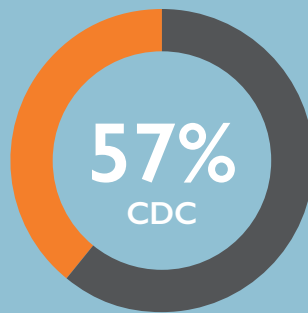
90%

90% of planning applications across the partnership are within agreed time limits, which is up from 87% last year

Based on an analysis of national planning performance, the partnership are amongst the top 30 most improved Councils

WASTE

Working in partnership with Ubico, we have delivered some of the highest recycling rates in the country - Cotswold (CDC) 57%, Forest of Dean (FODDC) 54% and West Oxfordshire (WODC) 60%



Environmental Services Innovation Programme

76,000



green licences issued

12%

reduction in missed bins from 22/23 baseline

£1.1M



additional income and savings

PEOPLE

Silver Award for Carbon Literacy with more than 135 key employees certified as carbon literate



358

people were nominated for a range of Employee Recognition Awards in celebration of their outstanding work

CUSTOMER SERVICE

12,437

signed up to e-billing

From March 23, the partnership has regularly been in the top 10 councils nationally for telephone customer satisfaction

48,500



reduction in call volumes since the last report



61,000

households use digital services to manage online council tax, order green waste licences, and apply for and receive benefit payments

Planet: Responding to the climate emergency

Tackling climate change is the challenge of our generation, and with each shareholder council declaring a climate emergency as well as an ecological/ biodiversity emergency, our response is central to everything we do and seek to develop all the time.

Rolling out Carbon Literacy training to employees

Publica's business plan states that we are aiming to be recognised as a gold level Carbon Literate Organisation (CLO) by 2025. This will support our shareholder councils' commitment to the council operations and buildings being carbon neutral by 2030. We are one of only 52 companies to have achieved CLO status. More than 135 key employees, including 15 of our senior managers, are now Carbon Literate and have made individual and group pledges to take action on climate change. To achieve Gold CLO, we are aiming for at least 60% of our people to be Carbon Literate as well as delivering Carbon Literacy training to the sustainability director and two governors at Hartpury University, promoting Carbon Literacy to local groups and organisations and incorporating it into our contracts.

Carbon Literate
Organisation
Silver



Climathons – leading the community to a sustainable future

We have run Climathons at Cotswold and Forest of Dean. The workshop style events bring together experts and local communities to think about how to tackle the climate emergency. The initial sessions have been a real success with more planned.

Electrifying the council's fleet

This year we have made some good progress across the partnership in expanding the councils' electric vehicle fleet and reducing their carbon footprint as a result. We have seen more electric street sweepers and vans introduced along with the first electric waste collection vehicles. Reducing the carbon output of the waste fleet will make a huge difference to the overall carbon footprint across the partnership.



Expanding the use of solar across the districts

We have built upon the great work across the partnership to introduce more solar power to create energy for the councils' buildings. Following on from the Forest of Dean, Cotswold has now had solar installed on its office building and panels are currently being installed at Elmfield to offer green energy to new tenants Hexagon. This is part of a broader project which will see Solar PV installed on a number of each council's property assets. We have also seen the Cotswold Solar scheme continue to prove very successful with local residents signing up to the scheme to have solar installed on their homes.

Expanding the electric vehicle charging point network

All our partner councils have made progress over the last year with installing public charging points to help encourage and facilitate the use of electric vehicles across the district. New charging points have been installed in public car parks in West Oxfordshire and Cotswold while both Forest of Dean and Cotswold have been successful in bidding for ORCS funding to install charging points across a number of their council owned car parks.

Efficient use of office buildings

Work has recently been completed at both Cotswold and West Oxfordshire council office buildings to consolidate space and free up space which can then be let to tenants. This work has included building repairs and refurbishment and at the Woodgreen offices significant upgrade to

the technology serving the Council Chamber and committee rooms to provide virtual access to formal meetings for members of the public. The work across these sites has reduced each Council's costs and carbon footprint, whilst attracting a new revenue income stream. Work has also begun to deliver similar improvements for the Forest of Dean.

Providing a modern, flexible workspace

Our agile working programme has made good progress over the past year with new working spaces set up across all three council facilities. These upgrades, which will be continuing into 2025, will provide better and more modern working spaces for employees. These changes also include fabric improvements which reduce the carbon footprint of the buildings and where possible solar installations will deliver renewable energy to those buildings. These changes – expected to complete over the next year – will deliver measurable financial and environmental benefits as well as modernising and enhancing the working environment. The approach to agile and hybrid working is now well embedded enabling the changes described above to be delivered and reducing the carbon and financial costs of our transport by around 50%.



People: supporting our employees to deliver fantastic services

**INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE™**

We will only accomplish our aims and deliver the partner council priorities if the very best people work for the partnership.

The decision to bring services back into council employment has required a fundamental change in how we manage our employees across the different organisations. As such 2023/24 has been a transitional year while we support employees through the changes and make sure that service delivery is maintained across the partnership.

However, we have still made good progress in key areas for development within Publica and more progress has been made this year to create an offer to prospective employees that stands out from the standard public sector employment offer and best supports the great people we already have.

Supporting our employees through the Publica review and transition

Change is often a challenge, and we have been working hard to make sure that all employees understand the changes taking place across the partnership and have access to the support they need. This has included an agreed communications plan to keep employees informed, training for managers to help them better support their people and raising awareness of our employee support services.

Providing support for our employees

We continue to provide a great support and benefits offer. We have renewed the excellent Medicash offer, along with upgrading the Employee Assistance Programme through Spectrum Life, offering counselling, legal support and wellbeing services.

Upgrading our training offer

This year we upgraded our online training platform to Atlas. It is an upgraded version of the Existing iHasco platform which will provide better functionality and reporting as it is implemented. We have also continued with our new training brochure, providing a wide range of training courses for employees.

Our people making a difference in communities

Many of the teams across Publica have taken up the two days of free volunteering that we offer to help local communities. As well as taking part in our organised group litter picking events for the Severn Estuary Big Beach Clean and the Great British Spring Clean, this year our people have found imaginative ways to volunteer their time. These have included providing drone training to public bodies and leading a local scout group on their summer camp.



Place: Delivering for businesses and communities

Across the partnership we all share the same ambition to not only deliver great council services, but also deliver against the local priorities for each council area.

Each partner council has its own ambitions, and we have made some great progress against them over the past year, making a real and measurable difference to the lives of residents and businesses.

We are incredibly proud of the amazing work that has been delivered in communities across the partnership, working hand in hand with councillors, council leadership teams, local organisations and our residents. Here we highlight just some of the fantastic work that has been done over the past year.

Continuing our work as sector leaders in Local Plan development

After winning initial funding to become part of the government's Proptech Fund (a national project to apply digital methods of engagement to improve Local Plan consultations) we have gone from strength to strength, being awarded another two rounds of funding to continue the work and we are now being held up as an example to other councils of how to run Local Plan consultations. We have seen numbers of people responding to consultations increase across the board. We will be applying our learning to the next stages of the Local Plan development at all the partner councils with Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire due to get new plans submitted to examination shortly.

Continuing the fight to tackle sewage in our waterways

The councils are working hard to limit sewage pollution in waterways across the districts through close working with water suppliers

and local organisations. This year we saw another sold-out Waterways Day in West Oxfordshire along with a sold-out Sewage Summit in the Cotswold district.

Taking an innovative approach to affordable housing for local people

All our partner councils want to deliver affordable housing where the market is not delivering sufficiently to meet the needs of local people. This year Cotswold and West Oxfordshire employed specific roles to drive forward delivery along with exploring options for the councils to build their own homes. There are currently two exemplar net carbon zero affordable housing schemes being driven by Cotswold and West Oxfordshire District Councils, on council owned land. We have also seen another 459 affordable homes delivered across the partnership.



Providing leisure services for local residents

A lot of work has gone on across the partnership this year to help people improve their health, wellbeing and fitness. On top of new playing pitch strategies being approved at all three councils there have also been other significant successes:

- West Oxfordshire has secured just over £1M through developer contributions to improve the provision of sport and leisure facilities in the district.
- Cotswold has seen ongoing delivery against the ambition of the 'Active Cotswold' programme with 'fit kits' being introduced for community groups to allow people with limited mobility to exercise and a joint exercise programme being launched district wide in partnership with Mr Motivator.
- The Forest of Dean Communities Team has worked with Freedom Leisure to deliver free, fully inclusive Gentle Games sessions sitting down or standing up. Games include curling, skittles and golf and are a great way to socialise and play games in a relaxed environment.

Delivering support for communities and the economy through the Prosperity Funds

The partnership was successful in securing over £15M in funding through the Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund. Over the past year teams have delivered a wide

range of work using the funding including grant schemes for local businesses, work to improve connectivity by installing new infrastructure and transport options, and work to upgrade and improve village halls.

Partnership fundraising projects go from strength to strength

The incredibly successful Crowdfund Cotswold continues to generate funding for amazing local projects, with more coming to fruition this year and a total of £1M now raised for local causes. This year, West Oxfordshire also funded its first projects through the Westhive crowdfunding platform launched in October 2023. The lottery approach at Forest of Dean also continues to provide valuable support to local organisations.

Regenerating town centres across the partnership

There has been a real focus on regenerating town centres over the past year. In Cotswold we have seen the completion of some schemes in Cirencester along with the first consultation on a new Masterplan to drive the wider development of the town centre. In the Forest of Dean some brilliant work has taken place to start regeneration across all the major towns in the district. In West Oxfordshire the improvements in Marriotts Walk continue while planning has started on regenerating Carterton and improving charter markets in major towns.



Delivering sustainable leisure services

This year saw the culmination of some great work to retender the leisure contract in Cotswold with Freedom Leisure taking over in August 2023. Since the move, works have been completed to upgrade and improve leisure centres. Forest of Dean also extended its successful contract with Freedom Leisure while the West Oxfordshire contract has shown a real positive upturn with membership numbers increasing steadily and putting the leisure service on a stronger financial footing. Upgrade works were also undertaken to repair the roof at Chipping Norton Leisure Centre.

Work is continuing to bring forward a sustainable development proposal to deliver sports, leisure and community facilities at the Five Acres site in the Forest of Dean in the biggest project the council has undertaken in many years.

Fast delivery of disabled facilities grants

Based on data gathered last year, our partner councils are amongst the fastest in the country when it comes to providing vital support for some of our districts' most vulnerable residents. Disabled facilities grants help towards the costs of making adaptations at home so that residents can continue to live there. Cotswold is in the fastest 10% of authorities in England to deliver these grants.

Improving car parks across the districts

All the partner councils have made commitments this year to improve their parking offer. In West Oxfordshire more charging points have been installed, new signage has been put in along with other upgrades. Cotswold District saw the completion of the total refurbishment of the car park in Bourton-on-the-Water and Forest of Dean committed to a car park regeneration programme along with the installation of new charging points by the end of the 2024/25 financial year.

Tackling fly tipping

Over the past year we have seen Cotswold and West Oxfordshire take action to tackle fly tipping. In Cotswold the team were successful in attracting more than £38,000 in funding to run a campaign letting people know about their responsibility when it comes to paying for waste collections. The campaign has been a real success getting national coverage. In West Oxfordshire there has been some great work with the Thames Valley Police, Ubico, and local farmers and landowners to provide support around fly tipping on private land.



Areas of focus for the coming year

In 2024 we agreed a new 12 month Business Plan to refocus the organisation to supporting the transition of services into the councils' direct employment while also keeping service delivery running.

That plan outlined our commitment to continued delivery of the three priorities of People, Planet and Place. It also added a fourth priority of Transition.

Over the next year we will be focusing on the following:

- **Continuing our efforts to modernise and improve services still provided by Publica.** We have made great progress on this as evidenced by this report and those from previous years. We will be continuing to improve our service delivery, both to make them more efficient and help with the partner councils' financial challenges but also provide a better service to residents.
- **Supporting the delivery of council priorities.** While a number of services delivering against the councils' priorities will be moving back to direct council employment, those services remaining in Publica will, where possible, continue to provide support and guidance.

- **Refocussing Publica following the Phase I transition.** With many employees leaving Publica as an employer, we will need to refocus the organisation around the new approach to partnership working and to effectively deliver the services remaining in Publica.
- **Supporting the ongoing transition.** With Phase I due to complete in November 2024, we will be looking to support the councils with the proposed Phase 2 transition in 2025.
- **Delivery against the Publica priorities.** This will still be a key area for us, and we will be continuing our efforts to improve as an employer, support our districts and do what we can to address the climate emergency. This will all be advanced with partnership working at the heart of our approach.





The Publica partnership:
Delivering more locally by
working together

PUBLICA

Staying true to the Publica Values

The values developed at the company's inception hold strong today and will help guide us to achieve our purpose.

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 and we adapt 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.



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Publica Annual Report: Progress in 2023/24