

# Productivity Plan

July 2024

## Introduction

This productivity plan has been produced in response to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities<sup>1</sup> review of local government productivity.

We welcome the opportunity to highlight the actions we are taking to boost productivity and reduce waste and outline the barriers facing local government.

## Becoming Somerset Council: A Unitary Authority

Somerset Council came into existence in April 2023, bringing together the former Somerset County Council and the four district councils of Somerset: Mendip District Council, Somerset West & Taunton Council, South Somerset District Council, and Sedgemoor District Council.

The move to a simpler, single tier model was approved by Government and aimed to reduce waste and duplication. The business case set out a plan to deliver £18.5m of savings per year, from 1 April 2023. By 31 March 2025, we are projected to exceed this by saving £20.3m per year.

## Financial Context

In November 2023, Somerset Council's Executive declared a financial emergency due to the soaring cost of providing key services, particularly adults and children's social care.

In order to set a balanced budget for 2024/25, the Council looked for savings across all service areas and made a series of difficult decisions to reduce costs. We endeavoured to consider the options that a commissioner may review if a section 114 was served, whilst also delivering the Council's priorities. We have stopped all non-essential in-year spending and recruitment, reviewed our contracts, and started programmes to dispose of investments and assets.

## Improvement and Transformation

In addition to these measures, we have significantly accelerated the pace and broadened the scale of our transformation work to target long-term financial sustainability. We know incremental changes to discrete parts of our organisation will be too slow and narrow to deliver on what is needed.

In February 2024, we launched our ambitious Improvement and Transformation Programme to deliver a new organisational design that is: flexible and agile, smaller and leaner, data driven and digitally enabled, sustainable and resilient, and local, connected and inclusive.

This programme is bringing together the activity required to deliver our vision, redesign our organisation, reshape our workforce, and transform our services. We will design out repetition and duplication, streamline governance, management layers and decision making, and reduce the overall workforce by 20-26%. This will aim to deliver £40-50m of savings by 1 April 2025. We are clear that our first step in our programme is reducing the Council pay bill through employing less staff and ensuring robust establishment control.

Our new Target Operating Model will describe the kind of council we want to be and how we will work to ensure residents of Somerset receive the services they need from a workforce which is smaller, costs less yet is more efficient and productive.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the request was made the department has changed its name under the new administration to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

Through our Partnerships, Localities and Devolution programme, we are working closely with our City, Town and Parish Councils, and with Parish Meetings, to harness and build our collective power to deliver outcomes for the people of Somerset and ensure much-valued community assets and services are run according to local priorities. Our [Asset & Devolution Framework](#) was agreed in January 2024 and in May we signed the first historic devolution deal with Bridgwater Town Council. We have more plans to further devolve services and assets, including with our other largest towns of Taunton and Yeovil, alongside our smaller city, town and parishes.

We are also strengthening our partnership with the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector and working collaboratively with the Integrated Care Board to reduce duplication and enable the organisations best placed to support our residents ([VCSFE Memorandum of Understanding](#)).

### **Adult Social Care Transformation**

Our Adult Social Care Transformation Programme, '[My Life, My Future](#),' is directly helping improve productivity, improve outcomes, and promote independence for local people. We have achieved:

- 30-40% increase in efficiency, speeding up assessments and crisis prevention.
- 95 additional individuals annually can stay at home, avoiding residential care.
- 21% reduction in support package adjustments to preserve independence.
- Reablement success rates have improved by nearly 20%.
- Assessments for youth transitioning to adult services now occur before age 18, improving planning and saving £500 per person, per week.
- The formation of Learning Disability teams and enhanced review processes have cut the average cost change at reviews by nearly 50%.
- A projected £10m saving from the Adult Social Care operating budget.

Our collaborative, early help and prevention-focused work which helps individuals access care and support services within their local area has been formally recognised as a particular strength in a recent LGA Adult Social Care Assurance Peer Challenge (March 2024).

### **Children's Services Transformation**

Our Children's Services [transformation programme](#) focusses on those things that have the greatest impact on children and families' lives. For example, our award-winning Homes and Horizons project is a trail-blazing strategic partnership between Somerset Council, Shaw Trust, and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, to deliver 10 family-sized homes for children as part of a new model of care for Somerset's most vulnerable young people. It will also provide 20 specialist foster carers and a brand-new, therapeutic education service on two sites within the county, designed to increase young people's life chances through better educational results and improved mental health and wellbeing.

We are significantly increasing the amount of early help for families across the County through Connect Somerset. This is so families and children are resilient and supported earlier, which reduces the need for more expensive acute services from the Council, Health, Education and Police. Connect Somerset is a way of working that includes community hubs in rural areas where families can access support, professionals working better together in local neighbourhoods, and integrated data to support professional communication and to ensure those most in need are helped.

## Service Reviews and Improvements

We are committed to continuous learning and improvement, reviewing our services to enable us to be as productive as possible. In the last 12 months both Adult Services and our Equalities and Diversity work have been subject to external Peer Reviews. We are also engaging with the Local Government Association to carry out a full Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2024.

Service Improvement Plans are being developed for all services, aligned to our corporate vision and priorities as set out in our [Council Plan](#). We are currently in the process of refreshing our governance, performance, and risk frameworks to reflect our organisational design principles and develop working practices in our new Council. To strengthen our assurance and oversight of risk, performance and budget management, a monthly officer and member Performance, Risk and Budget Board has been set up.

Data, insight and performance will be integral to how our organisation operates. We are involved in the LG Inform Benchmarking club, and we use service specific benchmarking tools such as Housemark for Housing services to compare our service performance and to contribute towards our evaluation of value for money. Further to this we have secured funding from the National Institute for Health and Care Research for a Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC), the aim of which is to boost research capacity and capability, enabling the Council to improve evidence-based decision making, ensuring our resources are deployed where they will have the most impact.

We have recently adopted a new set of Values and Behaviours designed and agreed by colleagues across the whole Council which are front and centre of our vision and priorities. Our commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is part of these values and is in line with our statutory duty as set out in the Equality Act 2010. We are committed to an inclusive working environment and providing services for all our residents in an accessible way. We will consider the nine protected characteristics within our decision making with the addition of ensuring our decisions have mitigated negative impact on rural communities, armed forces, carers and areas of deprivation. All colleagues are required to complete online training modules on EDI.

## Digital, Data and Technology

At our core, we are focussed on delivering value and impact, we will be maximising the use and opportunity of digital, Artificial Intelligence and data insight to help us realise our vision. Our processes will be streamlined and redesigned to support us to do that efficiently and effectively and we will automate any work that is repeatable and can be mapped. Any work that is complex, unique, intuitive, one of a kind and relational will be done by our people, who will be problem solvers: highly skilled, agile, continuously learning and locally based in our communities. Our collaboration with organisations such as Microsoft, Newton Europe and the LGA is assisting in making best use of external advice and support.

We are committed to being digital and data led. For example, our nationally leading **Transform Family View** app is an eco-system of innovative data joining products that integrates internal social care, early help and education datasets with Police, NHS, DWP, Probation and VCFSE organisations. This enables joined up, holistic views of vulnerable

people, faster access to data for crucial decision making, reduced administrative burden, and improved efficiency and effectiveness of front-line service delivery.

We know that many people want to access the council using their smartphone or computer but for others this is not an option. We will increasingly provide 24-hour digital access to interact with us, but we will still be here if our residents and service users need to have a conversation. We will work hard to make sure that all contacts with the council are user friendly, promoting a culture of trust and reliability. Remote working and learning are providing more opportunities for people to live in different parts of the country to where they work or attend education, but this doesn't remove the need to strive for better physical connections. We will work to improve the equity of access to opportunities, both physically and digitally, across the county.

We are also trialling Artificial Intelligence, including Microsoft Co-pilot and chat bots, across a wide area of services to identify opportunities to enhance services and improve the productivity.

### **Specific Spend**

As part of the workforce element within the organisational transformation programme, we are committed to a reduction in agency spend, a reduction in interims and consultants, removal of vacant budgeted posts and reduction in management costs.

Our agency spend for 23/24 was £13.1m, we are targeting a reduction of circa £3m in 24/25. Our agency spend is impacted by difficulties in attracting, recruiting, and retaining staff across the Council, including Planning, Legal and other specialist roles. Somerset Council pay structure will be reviewed in 2025/26. A Total Reward approach will ensure we are seen as an employer of choice, reduce the need for agency workers and enable recruitment to locally hard to fill roles.

Our data in relation to Trade Union time as a % of the pay bill is published in line with our responsibilities under the Local Government Transparency Code 2015. For 2022/23 the % for central staff was 0.03% and for education staff it was 0.1%.

### **Barriers to Productivity**

*"The Government elected after the next UK General Election, regardless of their political persuasion, must embark on a fundamental review of the systems of local authority funding, local taxation, and delivery of social care services."*

**LUHC Committee report 'Financial distress in local Authorities', 1 Feb 2024**

We are actively pursuing all available opportunities to boost productivity at Somerset Council but, as the LUHC Committee recognises, we cannot achieve long-term stability or achieve our long-term aspirations without Government support. Both the Local Government Association (LGA) and the County Councils Network (CCN) have published white papers setting out the barriers facing local government. Here are the specific barriers impacting on residents, businesses, and communities in Somerset:

**Local Government Finance:** This is the greatest challenge facing public services in Somerset. We support the LGA and CCN calls for fairer funding. We need:

- Long-term, multi-year funding settlements to allow for planning investment, effective budgeting and sustained action.
- An end to the unfair, costly and resource intensive competitive bidding system for funding across all central government departments which distracts from core service delivery and strategic planning.
- Council Tax system reform to give us greater flexibility and freedom to raise income locally.
- A national Government-funded Council Tax Reduction Scheme to free up council funds and provide a fair, protected scheme for our most vulnerable residents.
- A commitment to maintain commitment to essential funding streams such as UK Prosperity Fund

**Adult Social Care:** We have long supported and led national calls for urgent action to reform adult social care. We need:

- Adult social care to be funded adequately.
- Increased pay for care workers to address the recruitment and retention crisis.
- The barriers to data sharing removed to support more collaborative joint working with the NHS.
- Regulatory freedom and the associated funding to develop community-based initiatives which promote early intervention and help when and where it can be most effective.

**Children's Services and Education:** In Somerset, we aim to provide every child with the best opportunity to succeed. We need:

- The Government to write off all Dedicated Schools Grant deficits.
- Investment in our children's futures as described in our Education for Life initiative, with a focus on educational inclusion and attainment.
- Reform of provision for children with Special Educational Needs &/or Disabilities (SEND) are crucial.
- The national problem of profiteering by providers to be tackled.
- Government recognition and funding support for those activities which enable people to require fewer high-cost interventions from statutory services.

**Climate Change and Net Zero:** In Somerset, we are committed to tackling the climate and ecological emergency which directly impacts residents in Somerset by contributing to the global effort to achieve net zero emissions, local nature recovery and supporting green growth. We need:

- The development of a clear national policy, enabling Councils to lead efforts to tackle the climate and ecological emergency, the creation of longer-term funding agreements (including funding for nature recovery, climate resilience and adaptation) and legislative framework that encourage behaviour change.
- Enable the area to build on the success that Somerset has had through the Somerset Rivers Authority, by requiring enhanced cooperation and partnership working across all relevant agencies whilst recognising the need for greater levels of investment.

**Housing, Infrastructure and Transport:** In Somerset, we are committed to improving our housing, infrastructure, energy and transport systems. We need:

- Support through legislative reform, strategic investments reform and longer-term funding certainty (removing the need to develop costly bids for funding).





- Further action to tackle the national nutrient neutrality issue which is holding up delivery of around 18,000 homes in Somerset, but in a way which reflects the need to clean up our rivers and protect our communities from flooding.
- Longer term funding to support rural transport, in particular public transport and active travel, which supports our ambition to move to Net Zero by 2030 and improve social mobility.
- Sustained commitment and accelerated delivery from Department Culture Media and Sport and BDUK to the roll-out of gigabit capable broadband in hard-to-reach communities including areas of Somerset not currently in contract for this, reinforced by the guarantee of regular strategic dialogue with the authority about implementation.
- Reflecting the success in Somerset in relation to delivery of major energy projects that will support decarbonisation such as Hinkley Point C, the new Giga factory. However, continued growth and success at the sub-regional scale is constrained by grid connections that will be vital for green growth and the move to net zero.

**Devolution, Regeneration and Local Growth:** In Somerset, we agree there is huge potential to harness the strategic role of councils to enable economic growth and encourage positive social mobility if we had the local flexibility to tailor this to the needs of our areas. We need:

- A level playing field across the country where all areas have a combined multi annual revenue and capital allocation for local growth and regeneration (including factoring in UK Shared Prosperity Funds to enable fully devolved planning and delivery over a sustained period rather than short term allocation dependent on central Government priorities). This should be based on a common formula, using indicators that give appropriate weight to rurality.
- Multi-year funding commitment for local delivery of business support and careers advice.
- Greater local influence on funding innovation and business growth (including Innovate UK funds).
- A devolution deal enabling local priorities to be agreed with Government, including a commitment to devolve the Adult Education Budget, recognising that the accountability to deliver would sit with the Council and its partners.

