



West Devon  
Borough Council

# Productivity Plan

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2024-25



# Introduction

West Devon is an incredibly special and important place, home to a World Heritage Site, bustling market towns and the stunning moorland of Dartmoor. There are however challenges.

There is a serious lack of affordable housing in West Devon which creates a real challenge for ordinary working people and has an impact on the local economy. We have an ageing population with all the care and support needs that entails. There are pockets of deprivation as well as issues of rural isolation and loneliness.

The council welcomes external challenge and support which informs our thinking to innovate and to continually improve. The council has a history of good external audit opinions and audited accounts published on time.

In March 2024, the council had an external review undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA), which concluded that ...

*“West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and is delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities.”*

➤ Peer Challenge Position Statement March 2024

➤ LGA Peer Challenge Feedback Report

**57,100**

population

**22,590**

households

**1,161km<sup>2</sup>**

Least populated Authority in the South West

# A track record of innovation and efficiency in delivery

West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) and its neighbour, South Hams District Council have pioneered an innovative shared services partnership which started in 2007.

The partnership comprises a shared workforce and integrated systems and processes – effectively we have one organisation supporting two councils.

This generates on-going savings of £6.2million a year, which is shared between the two councils demonstrating excellent value for money. This has enabled the councils to protect core services and respond to the needs of our communities. The review team recognised the critical importance of these arrangements, and concluded ...

*“it is this joint working that is at the heart of a highly productive organisation”.*

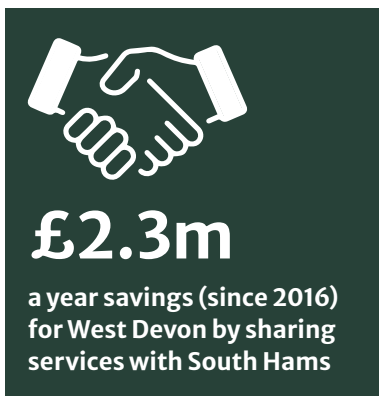
We embrace continuous improvement, and all members of our senior leadership team have undertaken reviews of other councils as part of the LGA corporate peer challenge process. The examples of best practice gathered, and imparted, through the process has ensured we continue to challenge and improve our own practice and remain on the cutting edge of local government thinking.

Since 2021 we have reviewed and realigned services to provide clarity of purpose, strong and effective managerial leadership and clear alignment with our key aims, priorities and clear ownership and responsibility for service performance.

This incremental approach to **service reviews** means we have been able to avoid the ‘big bang’ organisational paralysis that can occur with larger restructures and local government reorganisations and focus on our core purposes, which is how we can deliver cost-effective, reliable and easily accessible services for our residents.

Each year the senior leadership of the organisation challenges service plans and encourages identification of efficiency savings while continuing to improve service delivery. Planning ahead for 2025/26 we have already identified efficiencies amounting to over £0.6m across both Councils.

In addition, for the 2024/25 year we have been able to realign resources and invest an additional £347,000 in our priorities for housing, climate response and economy. This investment at a time where many councils are having to make cuts and reduce services.



# Technology and Data

85%

of transactions are now online

The council recognises the importance of modern and flexible technology solutions as key foundations for improving the customer experience, service efficiency and effectiveness and evidenced a strong track record of exploiting technology to drive improvements.

75%

★★★★★  
★★★★☆

of customers rate us four or five stars for online processes

WDBC has utilised technology effectively for many years. This is reflected in a sustained drive to support a 'digital-first' approach, which is more convenient for many service users, while retaining other contact methods for those with complex needs. This approach continues to drive cashable savings, while ensuring responsive services. Online customer satisfaction is high.

In the last few years, we have implemented 'low-code' solutions for our case management systems giving us greater control and flexibility over our customer online interactions, reducing the need for reliance on expensive IT consultants and change requests. We can now build our own online processes and amend them regularly based on customer feedback to ensure we offer the best possible service.

# Financial Management and stewardship

£3m

per annum reduction in government funding since 2009/10 (31% of 24/25 budget) with no cuts to services.

The council has a proven track record of **strong financial management and strategic financial planning**, which has ensured its financial sustainability and resilience, particularly in the face of unprecedented reductions in Government funding.

The 2022/23 external Auditor's Annual Report concluded that:

*'We are satisfied that the council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.'*

and

*'the Council continues to perform well with regard to financial sustainability, with a record of stable financial and budgetary management. Despite the challenging environment in which it continued to operate in during 2021/22 and 2022/23, the Council has achieved a balanced budget. Our work has not identified any significant weaknesses in arrangements to secure financial stability.'*

➤ Grant Thornton 22/23 Auditors Annual report

We've delivered underspends in each of the last three financial years of between 1-2% of the revenue base budget.



**98.37%**

Council Tax collection rate  
(26<sup>th</sup> highest of 181 Councils)

**97.79%**

Business Rates Collection  
Rates 23/24  
(23<sup>rd</sup> highest of 181 Councils)

For 2023–24 the council is predicting a revenue budget underspend of £159,000 (1.9% of the total Budget of £8.588m) as a result of active management of the council's finances.

The Council Plan, which is supported by a fully costed delivery plan, sets out the key aims and actions that the council will deliver for the next four years. We have a council plan, a matching finance plan and most recently a delivery plan to help ensure the council keeps on track – all of these key building blocks create a positive culture of continuous improvement.

The council has successfully secured Levelling Up Funding (LUF) monies for a new railway station and integrated transport hub in Okehampton, a collaboration between WDBC, DCC, Network Rail and GWR. The council would not have achieved this had they not already had in place a trusted, strong partnership between DCC at both member and senior officer level.

## Future Plans for efficiency and effectiveness

**392**

Core staff shared with  
South Hams

West Devon Borough Council has a strong framework of corporate governance and performance management which is reflected in very positive external audit findings and seen in the council's integrated performance management reporting process, which regularly reports on progress against our strategic objectives.

➤ **Organisational  
Development Plan**

An **organisational development plan** was launched by the council in February 2023 which set out our commitment and a long-term vision for how we will 'lead, manager, support and develop' our employees.

Our plan includes:-

- Reviewing our pay and reward strategy – benchmarking technical and professional pay rates to ensure we remain competitive as an employer
- Delivering a comprehensive manager development programme to ensure managers have the skills to lead good quality council services.
- A review of operational structures to ensure clear ownership, accountability and responsibility for service delivery

This continual investment in our workforce has meant that we have not had a significant reliance on expensive external consultants or agency staff.

# Barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove

We were disappointed that the Government rejected the House of Lords amendment to the upcoming Devon Devolution Deal which would have allowed district councils to be constituent members of the Combined County Authority with full voting rights.

We intend to lobby a future Government to rectify this democratic deficit and to maximise opportunities for Devons Districts to benefit from the deal.

In terms of how central government could be more productive and implement changes to assist local government in this area, we would recommend the following:

... We intend to lobby a future Government to rectify this democratic deficit and to maximise opportunities.

- Government departments should follow the example of local authorities, such as WDBC and SHDC, by exploring opportunities for sharing management and staff to better support placed based decision making.
- Implement financial rewards and additional freedoms for councils which have achieved embedded levels of integration and shared working.
- Remove prescriptive regulation which specifies input measures and operational processes, and stifles innovation, which delivers better outcomes at less costs e.g. requiring councils to collect recyclables and residual waste from every property every 2 weeks, when in ultra rural areas community composting and recycling arrangements would reduce waste, deliver services at lower cost and make big CO2 savings.
- Maximise the use of new technology – by removing outdated processes from all regulations e.g. all notices to be published online, and use of ANPR for parking enforcement.
- Create a stable financial planning environment for local government, so it can plan for the medium-term, including:
  - multi-year financial settlement to provide certainty and enable future planning.

- removing Council Tax referendum limits.
- ability to set our own level of planning fees.
- allowing affected areas to introduce a tourism tax e.g. bed night tax to go back into supporting the visitor economy.
- ringfencing second homes council tax premium for local housing authorities to reinvest in local affordable homes.
- ending competitive bidding for funding (UKSPF etc).
- additional funding to meet ever increasing costs of temporary accommodation – with temporary accommodation rate being increase in line with the LHA.
- additional funding for Local Authorities to help meet the increasing threat of cyber-attacks which have a direct impact on our ability to deliver services.
- Incentivise investment in new green infrastructure and affordable housing by introducing a discounted PWLB borrowing rate available to all local authorities for investment in housing and associated infrastructure regardless of whether they have a housing revenue account. Also offering discounted borrowing for infrastructure investment which delivers on the Net zero 2050 target. And by removing windfall profits from the sale of agricultural land for housing.

## Conclusion

The council has an excellent track record of financial management and planning, which is one of its underpinning core strengths. This is not our conclusion, but that of the Local Government Association peer challenge team.

The strength of the shared services partnership with South Hams District Council and the levels of savings and value for money that has delivered (over £6m annually), is a testament to how the councils have been innovative and pioneered this successful operating model for the benefit of its residents, businesses and the community.

Our incremental approach to service redesign ensures that we continue to deliver needed services while achieving further efficiencies.

