Gloucester City Council - Productivity Plan

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

The council successfully implemented two major transformation programmes, Together Gloucester 1 and 2, which restructured the organisation and introduced new ways of working.

The introduction of the digital platform Granicus at the council and the waste management system Alloy at UBICO (our waste contractor) has led to increased online self-service by residents and improved efficiency in waste management.

The uptake of online forms for services like waste reporting and garden waste has been good, showing a preference for self-service over calling the council.

The council's website has been updated to resolve accessibility issues, ensuring that it remains a primary source of information for residents.

The insourcing of IT and technology services has integrated the service into the council, presenting opportunities for sustainable and effective support for council operations.

Following a peer challenge review, the council revised its management structure to increase capacity and foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, ensuring that resources are aligned to effectively support ongoing transformation initiatives.

The council's workforce development strategy aims to cultivate a thriving work environment through four strategic themes: attracting and nurturing early-career talent, establishing ourselves as an employer of choice with a strong brand and employee value proposition, emphasizing the importance of skilled people management, and enhancing our capacity to capitalize on new opportunities.

The council's new transformation strategy focuses on delivering efficient, cost-effective, high-quality services with a unified approach to business matters, online self-service, and consistent issue management. We will simplify procedures, design services with resident input, reduce failure demand, and explore AI and automation for efficiency, adhering to GDPR. Team structures will be evaluated for better performance, and data will be used to drive insights and improvements.

To respond to financial pressures on the council's temporary housing service, up to £5million capital investment were approved last year to buy specific accommodation to provide housing rather than relying on hotels and bed and breakfasts.

Key service performance indicators are monitored through the council's performance platform, Pentana. This platform also tracks performance against service plan actions and progress towards the overall council plan. Each quarter, the senior management team conducts a peer review of the entire council's performance, offering constructive feedback and challenging all services to ensure continuous improvement.

The council has pinpointed channel shift opportunities as the most significant area for cost savings. By offering a high-quality online customer experience through the council's website and digital systems, the goal is to cut down phone call volumes by 25% within two years. This will be accomplished by ensuring the website is user-friendly and presents information in a manner that is clear, concise, and easy to understand, along with providing efficient online systems for public interaction. The anticipated annual savings from this initiative are around £150k.

Theme 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's transformation strategy includes a thorough plan for leveraging technology and data over the next three years to enhance decision-making, service design, and resource management. A central focus of the strategy is the establishment of a unified business engine to streamline interactions and promote online self-service, ensuring uniform management of requests across all contact methods.

The strategy emphasises simplified processes by advocating for the removal of redundant steps and clarifying the value of each process for both residents and the council. Guided by Government Digital Service (GDS) design principles, this effort aims to ensure all digital interfaces are clear and user-friendly. Additionally, a collaborative design approach will involve residents in the design and delivery of services to ensure they effectively meet their needs, fostering more efficient and user-friendly services.

A significant goal of the strategy is to reduce failure demand by making services more intuitive and user-friendly, thus conserving resources and reducing costs. The council will also explore automation and artificial intelligence to boost efficiency, adhering strictly to GDPR, the council's AI policy, and information governance standards. Furthermore, the strategy includes a review of the service structure, potentially restructuring or merging teams to optimize performance and efficiency.

Another key aspect of the transformation strategy is the utilization of data to drive efficiency. The council plans to make data accessible and transparent to internal stakeholders and, where appropriate, to the public. These initiatives are designed to transform the council's operations, making better use of technology and data to improve the quality and efficiency of services provided to the public.

There is robust governance of the delivery of this strategy consisting elected members and senior officers to ensure benefit realisation.

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

To address the question of reducing wasteful or "gold-plated" spending, the council employs a robust approach to identifying and mitigating waste within the organization. This effort is embedded in our standard financial and budget management procedures. All budgets are reviewed monthly, and any variances are thoroughly investigated and challenged to ensure that any inefficiencies are promptly addressed.

One of our notable invest-to-save initiatives has been aimed at tackling the national issue of temporary housing pressures. The council has invested in purchasing houses to improve our temporary housing and move-on housing capacity. Although it is too early to observe the results of this investment, we anticipate significant improvements in housing availability and quality for those in temporary accommodation.

Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion improvement work has been well established and delivers the council action plan using existing business as usual resources.

Regarding the percentage of the total staff budget spent on agency and consultants, 6.8% (£800k) is allocated to this category. Most of these staff are funded through separate grants and are employed to complete specific projects. To ensure value for money, normal agency staff are monitored similarly to our existing staff. The council is also dedicated to upskilling its existing workforce to reduce reliance on consultants, who are currently employed to fill skill gaps. Currently, only two consultants or agency staff have been in place for over a year.

In terms of governance structures to ensure accountability of spending, the council operates through an officer hierarchy supported by member committees. While we no longer share office functions with other councils, we continue to seek collaborative opportunities that enhance efficiency. For instance, when sharing external training costs with neighbouring councils, we take careful measures to factor out duplications of service between our council and any upper-tier council, ensuring that resources are utilised effectively and without redundancy.

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

The most significant central barrier to local productivity is single-year finance settlements. Without a clear indication about funding for multiple years, councils cannot effectively plan and deploy their resources.

We have also been hampered by the tendency of Whitehall to design and decide policy that affects councils without engaging the sector as fully and as early as it could. This has resulted in initiatives and funds that are more complicated than necessary and that are difficult and, in some cases costly, for councils to implement. We strongly support much closer policy co-design between central government and local councils.

We would also benefit from much greater flexibility for our council (and all councils) to decide how to raise and spend money locally. Central prescription and ringfencing constrain our ability to allocate our resources effectively.

We incur unnecessary spending and waste valuable officer time complying with rules, requirements, restrictions and processes imposed by central government and regulators. These include:

- The number of specific, formula-based revenue grants and their separate reporting requirements – it would be much simpler and more efficient to roll all specific grants into a single provision in the Local Government Finance Settlement.
- The wide range of separate one-off revenue and capital grant pots with onerous, costly and counter-productive bidding processes.
- Complicated, inconsistent, and misaligned processes for submitting data returns to central government.
- Lack of join-up between central government departments on issues including housing, homelessness prevention and asylum dispersal.
- Numerous statutory requirements to place notices in newspapers or issue written copies of routine notices.
- Excessive amount of information that is required in annual accounts or has to be published under the transparency code.
- Statutory overrides such as the requirement to value assets for accounts every year.
- Regulatory bodies seeking "to the letter" compliance with their statutory codes.