

DLUHC Question	SODC Evidence / Response
<p><b>1) How you have transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources</b></p> <p><b>Questions to consider:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has the organisation changed in recent years to become more productive? You may wish to consider what you have done around staffing, structure, operating models etc.</li> <li>• How do you measure productivity in your organisation?</li> <li>• What changes have you made to improve services, and what effects have those had?</li> <li>• What are your current plans for transformation over the next two years and how will you measure the effects of those changes?</li> <li>• Looking ahead which service has greatest potential for savings if further productivity gains can be found? What do you estimate these savings to be?</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• What preventative approaches you have undertaken and can the value of these be quantified?</li> <li>• Are there wider locally led reforms that could help deliver high quality public services and improve the sustainability and resilience of your authority?</li> </ul>	<p>South Oxfordshire is an efficient and effective council which provides value for money for residents while continuing to deliver high-quality services.</p> <p>For nearly two decades, we have been successfully collaborating our neighbouring authority of Vale of White Horse District Council – a partnership which has helped to drive our productivity. Through this cooperation, the councils have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• successfully merged our staff groups allowing us to create a single, rationalised, workforce dedicated to delivering for the residents of our districts.</li> <li>• streamlined our estate, a key example of which is having a central administrative office shared by both councils.</li> <li>• created and produced numerous joint strategies, plans and policies, thereby, reducing replication and ensuring a continuity of approach across South and Vale that aids efficiency.</li> </ul> <p>With the ambition of creating a council that is financially sustainable and more responsive to the changing needs and expectations of our residents we have, in partnership with Vale of White Horse, also been driving improvements in productivity through other actions and activities across a variety of areas. Highlights include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The approval of a corporate transformation programme designed to improve services, deliver value-for-money and ensure that the council is fit for the future: this activity has been further supported by the establishment of a dedicated transformation team to drive forward this programme of work.</li> <li>• Over the next few years, the council intends to take further action to further improve productivity and drive efficiencies. The council’s budget and medium-term financial plan includes £100,000 ongoing savings per annum from transformation activity.</li> <li>• The approval of a Joint Technology Strategy to ensure that the council is using the most appropriate and effective technology with a focus on cloud-based (Software as a Service) propriety solutions.</li> <li>• The insourcing of service contracts, on a case-by-case basis, from external organisations and businesses e.g., our grounds maintenance team. This has allowed us to have a greater control over the design, structure and costs of these services, and has provided the council with the opportunity to reimagine them for the future. This process of insourcing is still ongoing.</li> <li>• Initial work on changing our approach to waste services. We intend to become a more intelligent client who has more direct control over both our services and assets.</li> <li>• Purchasing and building more social housing and temporary accommodation. This will help to reduce the impact on homeless families and some of the costs faced by the council. The council is now registered as a social landlord.</li> <li>• The periodic review of the structure and scope of existing teams and service areas. Where it has been necessary to introduce changes to improve service delivery and drive forward efficiency, alterations are made. As part of this work, the council has recently created a new Communities directorate which will bring together a range of teams from across the organisation who are focused on delivering services to our communities. Following joint</li> </ul>

	<p>work with the Planning Advisory Service, a new structure has been implemented and an associated action plan which has led to increased productivity and performance of the service.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopting a Corporate Landlord Model for the ownership and management of all our property assets. By centralising these functions into one team, the council aims to make sure that our assets are managed in a professional, efficient and effective manner.</li> <li>• The approval of a Strategic Property Review to help ensure that the council's property assets are optimised to meet our corporate plan objectives.</li> <li>• Embracing hybrid working and the increased flexibility that it provides. Staff will continue to be guided to work in whatever location will deliver the best service for the customer. Sometimes this will be from home, sometimes from the office and sometimes from the community. This approach has supported both our retention of staff and widened our recruitment reach.</li> <li>• The introduction of a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The CRM is regarded as key to increasing online access to the council's services and improving the customer experience. It is also able to provide better-quality information/data around both customer contact and fulfilment – this can then be used to make further enhancements to our services.</li> <li>• The provision of regular updates on the council's activities through our quarterly Corporate Plan and Climate Action Plan Performance reports. These allow stakeholders (residents, councillors etc) to review our progress against targets and, therefore, help to drive improvements and ensure that we are delivering value for money.</li> <li>• Establishing a data hub on the council's website bring to together all of our reporting in an accessible and user-friendly setting.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>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?</b></p> <p><b>Questions to consider:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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?</li> <li>• Are there particular barriers from legacy systems?</li> <li>• How often do you share data with other organisations, and do you find this useful?</li> <li>• Are there opportunities to use new technology to improve workflows and systems, such as predictive analytics and AI?</li> </ul>	<p>South Oxfordshire recognises the advantages of technology in helping to improve decision-making, service design and the use of resources. In recent years, the council has approved a Joint Technology Strategy to ensure that we are using the most appropriate and effective technology to deliver service excellence. We, therefore, have an agreed approach to utilising equipment, software and processes to drive productivity and efficiency. Highlights include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A review of the council's current Technology Strategy to include recent developments within this landscape.</li> <li>• Using the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to increase online access to the council's services and improve the customer experience. Furthermore, it will provide better-quality information/data around both customer contact and fulfilment which can then be used to make further enhancements to our services.</li> <li>• Moving our legacy systems from data centres to cloud models. This should allow us to store, manage, collaborate, operate, and access our data more efficiently.</li> <li>• Implementation of a new planning system to replace existing system to improve performance and efficiency.</li> <li>• Employing in-cab technology in our new waste and street cleansing vehicles to identify more efficient ways of routing vehicles.</li> <li>• Further enhancements to our performance management approach. We intend to increase our focus on the development of service plans and the embedding of a 'golden thread' throughout our operations and activities. Furthermore, the council intends to develop and refine its performance management framework by focussing on strategic outcomes; this will help ensure that the performance information we provide can be used to drive and improve productivity. As part of this work, the council will explore opportunities to transition towards real-time reporting using business intelligence tools.</li> <li>• Continuing to make enhancements to the council's data hub to ensure that it remains a valuable and relevant publicly available resource.</li> </ul>

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<p data-bbox="91 215 734 279"><b>3) Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems.</b></p> <p data-bbox="91 311 734 462">I know we will share the aim to reduce waste wherever we can and, while you have all made huge strides in recent years, no organisation is ever 100% efficient. You should set out your plans to reduce wasteful of 'gold-plated' spend.</p> <p data-bbox="91 494 403 518"><b>Questions to consider:</b></p> <ul data-bbox="145 526 734 1458" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you approach identifying and reducing waste in the organisation? How do you monitor progress?</li> <li>• Where have you followed invest to save and what was the result?</li> <li>• 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 that training?</li> <li>• What percentage of total staff budget is spent on a) agency and b) consultants? How do you assess value for money on agency &amp; 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?</li> <li>• What governance structures do you use to ensure accountability of spend?</li> <li>• Do you share office functions with other councils and if so, how useful do you find this?</li> <li>• If you share external training costs with neighbouring councils, how do you factor our duplications of service between your council and your upper-tier council (if you have one)?</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="734 215 2150 311">South Oxfordshire has always been watchful of wasteful and unnecessary spending. Through our performance management reports, we monitor progress on spending and delivery. Nevertheless, the council recognises that there is always the need for constant vigilance and improvement.</p> <ul data-bbox="750 343 2150 1436" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The council continues to share resources and office functions with Vale of White Horse. We have found this to be an efficient and effective way of working. It has helped to reduce costs and increase productivity. By creating a shared workforce that is primarily based in one office, we have removed unnecessary duplication and, therefore, helped to keep our overall costs low. We have also been able to pursue (and will continue to progress) joint strategies, plans and policies – for example, the developing Joint Local Plan 2041.</li> <li>• During the development of each year's revenue and capital budgets, service teams are challenged on all budget lines, firstly through an officer led budget challenge exercise and then subsequently through a member led exercise. This helps ensure that budgets requested are realistic, are not over-inflated, and support delivery of statutory services and corporate priorities in line with the funding envelope available to the council. Progress in delivering services within set budgets is monitored through the budget monitoring and corporate reporting process. We have recently strengthened the finance function to support these activities given the pressures on council finances, and are reviewing the budget setting timetable, including involving Scrutiny committee earlier in the process. We are also engaging the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to support the council in training both finance staff and budget holders around their roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>• We intend to move to a more efficient and cost-effective new office in the next few years. It will be designed to reflect the changed working patterns of recent years. The proposed building, subject to a full business case, is expected to contain commercial office space which could be rented out to tenants.</li> <li>• We constantly monitor and challenge colleagues on the use of agency staffing and consultants; we are developing a preferred supplier approach to manage costs in this area further.</li> <li>• The periodic review of the structure, scope and activities of existing teams and service areas. Where it is necessary to introduce changes to improve service delivery and drive forward efficiency, alterations will be made</li> <li>• We will always consider the best way to deliver services, including, when appropriate, the insourcing of service delivery.</li> <li>• We will also continue to utilise the Corporate Landlord Model to make sure that our assets are managed in a professional, efficient and effective manner.</li> <li>• Further enhancements will be made to our performance management approach. We intend to increase our focus on the development of service plans and the embedding of a 'golden thread' throughout our operations and activities. Furthermore, the council intends to develop and refine its performance management framework by focussing on strategic outcomes; this will help ensure that the performance information we provide can be used to drive and improve productivity. As part of this work, the council will explore opportunities to transition towards real-time reporting.</li> <li>• We have a positive working relationship locally with our recognised trade union. We are open and transparent about the need and shape of change, and this openness is welcomed.</li> <li>• South Oxfordshire already publishes trade union facility time on our website – something that we will continue to do.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you have one, what is your assessment and experience of working with an elected mayor, combined authority, or devolution deal?</li> <li>• What proportion of your paybill is spend on trade union facility time?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We share a learning and development platform with Vale of White Horse. This provides mandatory, professional and discretionary training and development for all staff. We have a number of voluntary Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) champions across the councils.</li> <li>• We will continue to review and address workforce related themes to reflect the changed working patterns of recent years such as hybrid working.</li> <li>• We will invest further in schemes such as the National Graduate Development programme and the use of apprenticeships are part of the agreed Workforce strategy.</li> <li>• We will continue to uphold and review our governance structures to ensure accountability regarding decisions incurring expenditure.</li> <li>• We utilise a Cabinet structure with a Scrutiny Committee, chaired by a member of the principal opposition party. The Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding the Cabinet to account, policy development, and external scrutiny. We also have a Joint Audit and Governance Committee and a Joint Scrutiny Committee – both shared with Vale of White Horse. The Joint Scrutiny Committee are responsible for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ considering and making recommendations to the relevant Cabinet members on the assessment of the performance of contractors delivering joint contracts.</li> <li>▪ considering any matter within the terms of reference of the Committee affecting both councils' areas and their inhabitants.</li> <li>▪ reviewing and scrutinising the performance of the councils in relation to its policy objectives, performance targets and/or particular service areas.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• We are a member of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, a joint committee of the six councils of Oxfordshire together with key strategic partners. We work together to deliver a better future for the county – as set out in the Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development in Oxfordshire.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>4) The barriers preventing progress that the government can help to reduce or remove.</b></p> <p>These will be barriers preventing you from going as far or as fast as you would like to. I would like your plans to set those out, so that we can understand how government, or the market, can help you overcome these barriers to go even further.</p> <p><b>Questions to consider:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the barriers preventing you from improving productivity further within your organisation?</li> <li>• What are the barriers preventing you from improving services further?</li> <li>• Are these barriers consistent across multiple services?</li> </ul>	<p>While South Oxfordshire continues to be an efficient, effective council which provides high-quality services and value for money, there are several barriers which are inhibiting our ability to make further progress in these areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty over funding. Central Government has consistently failed to provide a multi-year financial settlement for local government. This has made it difficult for councils to plan ahead and make the longer-term decisions necessary to drive forward substantial projects and programmes of improvement.</li> <li>• A lack of clarity regarding the future direction of local government finance. The current system of local government finance has been under scrutiny for some time. Although there have been hints and potential proposals regarding the way forward, no concrete details have been provided.</li> <li>• Little flexibility over our own finances. Government's refusal to allow councils greater control over their own budgets and finances limits the actions we can take. The current system of central prescription and ringfencing constrain our ability to allocate our resources effectively. This includes restrictions on the use of capital receipts, and referendum limits on council tax. The latter particularly impacts councils such as ours where the level of Band D council tax is amongst the lowest in the country for a shire district. In addition, only being able to hold up to 200 housing properties before being required to have a Housing Revenue Account may limit councils that, like us, have previously taken the decision to divest of their housing stock, in their ambition to help deliver better housing outcomes for residents.</li> </ul>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would you need to remove those barriers? What do you need from government, the market or elsewhere?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific, formula-based revenue grants and their separate reporting requirements<br/>The council believes that it would be much simpler and more efficient to roll all specific grants into a single provision in the Local Government Finance Settlement.</li> <li>• Competitive grant funding.<br/>Forcing councils to compete for ad hoc grants creates a level of uncertainty regarding future funding. It puts pressures on local government resources and is a rather inefficient way of allocating support. Further, many of the available grants have unrealistic or onerous conditions, with often prohibitive application deadlines, and seem to have very little to do with providing either consistency or value for money.</li> <li>• Uncertainty over devolution and the structure of local government in England.<br/>Councils remain uncertain about how local government will be structured in their areas in the future. This inhibits long-term decision-making and can strain sector local networks and partnerships.</li> <li>• Lines of accountability/responsibility.<br/>The responsibility for many of Government's projects, programmes and policies are divided over multiple agencies and departments. This increases complexity, can create unnecessary duplication of effort and, therefore, creates inefficiencies.</li> <li>• Lack of engagement from HM Government.<br/>There is a lack of engagement from Government regarding the challenges councils face in implementing proposals from Whitehall and in the delivering of services. Central government does not seem to appreciate the difficulties that we face, nor understand the local issues which can make things more challenging. Further, 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.</li> <li>• Uncertainty over HM Government policy<br/>Continued changes and delays to policy (e.g., regarding household recycling and waste collection) make it virtually impossible for councils to take long-term decisions.</li> <li>• Procurement rules<br/>The current procurement rules place unnecessary and burdensome restrictions on local authorities. They should be relaxed to allow councils a greater degree of flexibility.</li> <li>• Excessive rules, requirements and restrictions<br/>The current statutory requirements to place notices in newspapers and/or issue written copies of routine notices wastes both time and money. Moreover, regulatory bodies seeking "to the letter" compliance with their statutory codes place unreasonable demands on local authorities.</li> <li>• Data returns<br/>The current processes for submitting data returns to central government are complicated, inconsistent and misaligned.</li> <li>• Demands for information.<br/>The amount of information that is required in the annual accounts or has to be published under the transparency code is excessive.</li> <li>• Availability of data.<br/>There are limitations regarding the amount of data available to local authorities. In numerous instances, information does not exist at the neighbourhood or district level or has extensive time-lags which would question its usefulness. This makes it more difficult to use data when making decisions.</li> </ul> |
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