



Buckinghamshire Council Productivity Plan

Update – October 2025

What is productivity at Buckinghamshire Council?

- For the purpose of this report - productivity refers to how efficiently and effectively the council uses its resources, such as staff, budgets, and assets, to deliver high-quality services and achieve positive outcomes for residents. Our approach seeks to balance multiple stakeholder interests, respond to external factors, manage significant increases in cost and demand for services and seek to ensure continuous improving through better use of data, technology, and collaboration and service reviews and redesign. Key principles underpinning our approach include implementing effective transformational programmes, delivering against our Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), benchmarking and use of data and ensuring the most efficient use of our workforce.

Transformation

Unitarisation

- Buckinghamshire Council became a unitary authority in April 2020, transitioning from a two-tier model with five legacy councils to a single unitary council, one of the largest in the country. In our first five years of existence, we have delivered £116.8mmillion in savings and have strengthened our resilience during a period of national volatility.
- Following a boundary review and local elections in May 2025, the number of Members reduced from 147 to 97, supporting clearer accountability and streamlined decision making.

Service Improvement and Transformation Programmes

- The **Better Buckinghamshire Programme**, which launched in July 2020, was a major transformation initiative designed to realise the benefits of unitarisation by ensuring consistent design and operation of functional services and the delivery of savings outlined in the original unitary business case. This has now been replaced by **@PACE**, a standard operating model launched in January 2025. This sets out our approach to the aggregation of specific functions: demand management, automation, management consolidation, financial controls and benchmarking. In addition to the operating framework, we have clearly articulated our expectations of our senior manager cohort and use a series of KPI's to measure and monitor performance.
- Our **Service Improvement Board (SIB)** chaired by our Assistant CEO co-ordinates and monitors the delivery of further change required in the organisation to fit this model, providing assurance on the delivery of positive benefits and MTFP savings.
- A **Corporate Project Management Office (PMO)** and dedicated **Capital PMO** have been established to ensure that we have a standardised approach to project delivery across the organisation and ensure that we have the resources to manage and monitor change and capital projects. A current example of this is piloting a new change methodology in the corporate landlord function, with other pilot projects underway across directorates and initial findings expected later in 2025.

Examples of productivity gains in the last 12-24 months:

Children's Services

- **Children's Services have restructured delivery** into 21 locality-based teams, integrating early help and statutory social care. This has reduced duplication, improved continuity of care, and cut the average number of handoffs per child by 24%, enhancing service responsiveness and collaboration.
- **Ofsted's May 2025 Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS)** recognised our progress and highlighted priorities on management oversight, neglect, transition and care leavers 21+. Our focus is to embed quality assurance and supervision, expand our in-house residential provision and prepare for our **Families First for Children Partnership reforms**, which will maximise resource efficiency through multi agency integration and co-production with partners. We remain in a 'Requires Improvement' (RI) category according to Ofsted and are committed to moving into 'Good' for all our children.

- **Timeliness in children’s social care assessments** has improved to 89% with strengthened safeguarding timelines and targeted SEND actions. We are delivering a focused SEND Improvement Programme, strengthening data quality and case management, with cross council oversight via our **“Critical 5” (our top 5 highest spend areas)** reporting and integrated performance and risk management to accelerate EHCP timeliness and reduce backlogs.

Adult Social Care

- Integrated services such as the **Transfer of Care Hub (ToCH)** improved hospital discharge times from 43 to 28 days in the period between October 2023 and May 2024, helping to reduce duplication across health, housing, and social care. Meanwhile, **targeted interventions** through **Opportunity Bucks**, since its inception in 2023, has delivered measurable outcomes in high-need areas including:
 - Tailored employment support to 30 individuals.
 - Participation in free numeracy courses with 41 residents.
 - Completion of 83 physical health checks.
 - Community Action Days attracting over 800 residents.
- **Dynamic purchasing systems** and expansion of in-house provision (e.g. Shared Lives) are improving market responsiveness and reducing reliance on costly external placements.
- A **“grow your own”** workforce strategy, supported by the **Health and Social Care Academy**, is improving recruitment into hard-to-fill roles and helping to reduce agency spend. Continuous improvement is being driven by robust quality assurance and data-informed decision-making. The use of the AI case notes tool, Magic Notes, is also enabling more direct work with residents – with an initial report in March 2025 indicating it has freed up -11 hours per week of practitioner time by reducing note-taking overheads.

Estates Consolidation

- We have moved to a 4:1 staff to desk ratio, **rationalising our office space post the pandemic**, unlocking capital receipts and lowering operating costs. The cost saving to the organisation as a result of reducing our estate has been £2.4 million in annual revenue savings and at least £4 million in capital receipts.
- Consolidation is a core lever in the **“Work Smart”** estates strategy, supporting flexible and hybrid working, improved asset utilisation under the corporate landlord model, and our net-zero pathway.

AI

- Early trials of **Microsoft Copilot**, which started in October 2023, have shown the tool increases staff efficiency by at least 30 minutes per week in certain roles (e.g., Executive Assistants) and is helping us to deliver a £466k saving in our Business Operations service. Across the council, those with Copilot M365 have reported time savings amounting in a 9.3% efficiency gain on average. This is critical given the increase in volumes across a range of services alongside a downsizing of staff numbers. Our 2025-28 roadmap prioritises automation of high-volume tasks, while automation will speed up document processing and summarisation, releasing capacity for front line work and high value activities.
- A cross-functional **AI Governance Board** oversees compliant ethical adoption, a use-case library and workforce training, with Corporate Management Team oversight for targeted initiatives and scaled delivery.

Financial Controls

Reducing Spend and Duplication:

- We operate a **disciplined Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)** that aligns resources to corporate priorities and underpins decisions on savings, investment and risk. In our first five years, we have delivered £116.8 million of savings, 26.5% of the 2020/21 net budget, and we plan a further £115.6

million by 2027/28. This represents £232.4 million of savings over eight years in total. This programme of savings is dependent on Member approval, community and service consultation where necessary, transparent reporting and scenario planning.

- **Budget grip** is important to the council and is maintained through weekly oversight in volatile areas, monthly Directorate Budget Boards, a CMT Budget Board, and quarterly Cabinet reports covering revenue and capital forecasts, savings trackers, debt and payment performance. Cabinet Members oversee their portfolio budgets alongside Service and Corporate Directors and ensure and agree any mitigations.
- We focus on the areas under **greatest financial pressure through our “Critical 5”** report - covering Adult Social Care, Children’s Social Care, Home to School Transport, the High Needs Block (DSG), and Temporary Accommodation. This report provides in-depth analysis of cost drivers and demand trends, alongside targeted actions to bring us back on track. This method is recognised as sector best practice.
- We have strengthened **corporate spend controls** to eliminate waste and duplication, including robust vacancy management requiring Corporate Director and Chief Executive approval, tighter application of the scheme of delegation, withdrawal of purchase-cards from non-essential users (reduced from 403 to 254 over the past 2 years), reduction of non-essential travel with maximised VAT recovery on mileage claims, and contract value reviews to drive down external spend (albeit these were temporarily paused due to service restructuring; they were reinstated from July 2025 once the new Head of Procurement was appointed).
- We have reduced the use of **expensive agency and interim staff** by a reduction of 35% in the last two years (306 in September 2023 in 199 in September 2025).
- We have brought commissioning and procurement together into a single hub for Adults and Health. This helps us manage demand more consistently, encourages competitive pricing, and ensures better value for money. We are also analysing supplier costs and the long-term expense of using agency staff to support the shift to permanent roles. As a result, we’ve added 28 new providers in homecare and supported living since 2023/24, and we’re forecasting a £1.6 million underspend on care packages.
- **Harmonising of policies, fees and charges** remains a core lever to remove inconsistency and duplicate processing across legacy systems, with productivity benefits tracked through service reviews and the @PACE operating model. Over 880 individual fees have been harmonised since 2020 across the Council.
- We apply **strong treasury and capital discipline** to keep financing costs low, deliberately maintaining an under-borrowed position, approving a £100 million facility for targeted capital investment, and scheduling £28 million of borrowing over the next four years - representing less than 5% of the total capital programme. All business cases must demonstrate a clear return on investment and meet defined financial thresholds (hurdle rates). This ensures that any revenue savings generated are sufficient to cover both the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) and interest payments before the investment is approved.

Workforce

- We continue to expand our **Horizons programme** and **Health and Social Care Academy**, putting in place provision for our people to progress and strengthen pipelines for hard-to-fill roles. Through our Horizons programme 222 roles were filled, 112 interventions were delivered (workshops, webinars, briefings, 1:1s), 63 interviews for roles with the council were held, with 20 employees securing further opportunities of which 17 were with the council.
- **Agency spend** has fallen by £4 million since 2020, with a 26% reduction in agency headcount through a robust process of recruitment controls and our commitment to internal redeployment.
- A **Management Essentials Programme** and targeted absence management have been developed to equip our people managers with the skills to get the most out of their teams and ensure staff are supported in the workplace. Staff satisfaction has risen to 74%, and sickness absence is now under

active review by the Corporate Management Team. A new approach introduced in January 2025 has contributed to a reduction in long term sickness cases from 76 to 52 per month, and short-term sickness from 528 to 370 per month between July 2024 and July 2025.

- Our sickness rates have reduced from their peak of 9.45 to 8.77 days lost per FTE over the past 6 months, which coincides with the introduction of the new Managing Sickness Absence Policy in January 2025. These rates align with the private sector (8.94) and outstrips the public sector (13.3) (CIPD Sickness Absence Managing Sickness and Wellbeing at Work 2025).

Partnership Working

- Partnership working is a core feature of how Buckinghamshire Council delivers for residents. While it can be challenging to draw a direct, quantifiable link between partnership activity and productivity gains, there is a clear and intuitive connection. By working collaboratively with partners, we are able to share resources, access specialist expertise, and strategically align around common priorities. These collaborative approaches help us to maximise the impact of our collective resources and deliver improved outcomes for our communities. Here are a few flagship examples of partnership working with Buckinghamshire Council:
 - Our new **“Growth Plan 2025-2035”**, launched in September 2025, aims to boost productivity and prosperity in Buckinghamshire’s economy. It focuses on five priorities: growing high value sectors, enhancing place & infrastructure, investing in people & skills, fostering innovation, and supporting partnerships and collaboration. This plan has been developed with partners and elected leaders through the Buckinghamshire “Growth Board” and aims to increase economic productivity growth to above 2% per year by 2035.
 - In **2024/25, Community Boards** supported 229 projects, investing £885k and leveraging £1.68 in match funding for every £1 spent. Since inception, 1290+ projects have been delivered or are underway with £6.7 million invested and around £12 million leveraged. A refined 8 board model went live in April 2025 to maintain the programme and ensure local voices can be heard and elected members can take action in our communities.
 - **Opportunity Bucks** focuses multi agency efforts into Buckinghamshire’s most deprived wards, with a clear programme structure, partnership sessions and budget oversights reported to Cabinet. In 2025, initiatives under the Opportunity Bucks programme have:
 - increased the proportion of young people who leave college to a positive destination (further education, apprenticeship or employment) by 19%;
 - achieved estimated cost avoidance of approximately £750,000 in rough sleeping through the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) team;
 - supported over 360 homes through the **Energy Doctor scheme**;
 - provided over 180 residents with severe mental illness with physical health checks.
 - Our **Strategic Partnerships** receive centralised secretariat support for 10 strategic partnership boards – spanning health and wellbeing, community safety, education, and economic growth – most of which meet quarterly. This streamlined support model enhances productivity by ensuring consistent coordination, efficient agenda planning, and timely minute-taking, while enabling strategic oversight and alignment across all boards.

Productivity Assurance

Reporting and Metrics

- A **Corporate Performance Framework** provides a structured approach to monitoring and evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of services delivered by the Council. Indicators, targets and thresholds are set and reviewed annually and are linked to Corporate and Directorate plans, and Corporate priorities. Each indicator has senior level ownership and accountability.
- Regular detailed reports are considered by the **Councils Corporate Management Team** with further management actions considered and agreed where necessary.

- For 2025/26, the number of **Cabinet Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** is being streamlined from 113 to 69. This shift focuses attention on the measures that matter most to residents and corporate priorities, while continuing to track wider service-level metrics and statutory indicators via the “Single Data List”.
- **Political reporting**, oversight and challenge is actively demonstrated via the Councils cabinet, and scrutiny arrangements.
- The council has an established **Internal Audit Service** that supports the council in the delivery of its strategic objectives through the provision of risk-based, independent and objective assurance. In addition, external auditors meet with senior leaders regularly and provide an annual report to the council.