

# PUBLICA

Delivering Local Priorities and Improving Services

## **Building a partnership for the future: Progress in 2022/23**

### **Foreword**

Dear Shareholder, Welcome to the Publica Annual Report for 2022/23.

This year we have been pushing forward at pace with our transformation journey outlined in the Publica Business Plan, to both improve the performance of services we provide for the partner councils and also make the most of our partnership model to become more efficient.

As we are evolving, the benefits of our partnership approach are becoming clearer and clearer through the transformation of the dated traditional council approach into more modern, efficient services. Yet again, we have had a year of good delivery against the council priorities with many projects recognised at a national level for their innovation and impact.

The application of the Publica Operating Model is continuing to yield results with service improvements to planning, democratic services and other areas. We have seen a large increase in residents using new digital services as we transition to modern and effective service offers, showing the model is right for local residents.

We launched Future Publica this year, our approach to meeting the financial challenges set by the partner councils. By capitalising on our partnership approach we can be both more efficient and continue to improve service delivery, looking to avoid the harsh service cuts many councils have been forced into over the past decade. It is a proactive approach to making more savings and efficiencies that will limit the impact on both staff and improve service delivery. The original target was £2m of annually recurring savings although as we have progressed the work it is becoming clearer that the first stage will open new opportunities for further savings beyond the original target.

What we have seen this year is we know we can achieve more and we know we can deliver it. Our work to progress the Planet, People and Place priorities is continuing at pace with major improvements to our support for staff, continued work to reduce our carbon footprint and a huge range of work to deliver against the priorities of our partner councils.

We also know there is further work across the partnership to improve our service delivery over the coming years. In the report you will read where we have made progress in driving up service performance, setting a solid foundation for further improvements.

We would like to thank the partner councils for their continued support and we are committed to this next stage of our journey working in partnership. Once again this report highlights how much of a difference the partnership is making in every district and how through working together we are delivering more for local people.

Jan Britton - Managing Director of Publica Group (Support) Ltd  
Sally Walker - Chair of the Publica Board

## **Working towards the Future Publica**

This year, we released the Future Publica vision, which sets out how we see the company continue on its improvement and transformation journey in the face of the increasingly challenging financial positions of all four shareholder councils. Future Publica is our strategic approach to transformation over the next three years to support the councils' needs of excellent local services, at a lower cost.

It is an evolution of the very successful partnership approach that has already delivered £14M of total savings for the councils and many service improvements.

It is founded on the Publica Operating Model. Fundamentally, what the model says is that the more customer enquiries and business transactions that can be completed through self-service, or in the contact centre, the lower the cost and higher the customer satisfaction. Only the most complex and high-risk service requests that need detailed casework and/or specialist knowledge should go through to our back-office specialists.

The implementation of the operating model across the partnership is a continuing effort when applying it across more than 50 different services. This year, great progress has been made again to improve services and drive efficiency:

#### **Channel Choice: providing residents with what they need at first contact**

Our Channel Choice project is the front end of the Publica Operating Model, giving residents what they need at first point of contact and ideally for most people, on a digital, self-service platform. Progress this year shows that the operating model is not only delivering results for our partner councils but also for our residents. More residents are using our digital services and the number of people needing to call or visit the council's customer services is decreasing.

Many customers are telling us that they want to interact with us digitally at a time that is convenient for them rather than the traditional routes which are the most costly forms of contact. However, we also recognise the importance of assisting customers who cannot engage digitally and continuing a telephone and face to face service for them. Flexibility in contact channels will make sure customers can engage with council services when it suits them best, enhancing their overall convenience and satisfaction and enabling us to operate more efficiently.

This year we have made even more services available through the websites, improved legacy processes from pre-Publica and improved our web content to give residents quick, easy solutions to achieving what they need. Telephone calls now only make up 46% of our total customer contacts, down from 75% in 2021. Our customer satisfaction remains one of the best in the country.

Over 65,000 more people are now self-serving through our digital channels and the use of e-forms has tripled since 2021, proving that the operating model is meeting the needs of residents. We have been able to divert resources to support other services and spend more time handling complex, often higher risk, cases. In time this will lead to savings for the partner councils.

This work will not stop as we constantly adapt to residents' needs and new technologies. We are currently exploring the options around the use of AI, digitising more services, rebuilding legacy processes and making better use of the councils' websites.

#### **Supporting Democratic Services across the partner councils**

Working closely with council Monitoring Officers, we have applied the Publica partnership approach to our Democratic Services teams. We recruited an experienced Head of Service that a single district council might struggle to attract and implement sharing of resources to increase efficiency and improve support for the committee system and members.

The turnaround has been widely praised by councillors at all three partner councils who receive this service. More is planned to make better use of IT systems and embed new practices to improve the committee system and support members.

#### **Improving planning services**

In 2021 we launched an improvement programme for our planning services that are now all performing well based on national benchmarking. We continue to proactively address the challenges planning services across the country have faced which include a lack of trained planners, competition from the private sector making it very hard to recruit, a big increase in applications over the pandemic and difficulties delivering the services during lockdown conditions. Improvements so far include:

- We have put in career graded posts to help grow our own planning specialists in the face of a challenging recruitment market
- Improved data and monitoring to drive productivity and improve customer contact
- Put in a new partnership planning validation approach that has cut validation times by over 60%
- A new approach to working with Planning Agents to make sure our time is properly charged and they do not rely on officers to spend time amending poor applications
- New validation checklists to help professionals and residents submit correct applications first time
- Consistent performance increases in time taken to approve applications. All three partner councils receiving the service now register top quartile performance (as of September 2023)
- During the pandemic we saw a huge increase in planning enforcement cases and our teams were hampered by limits imposed by lockdown restrictions and recruitment challenges. It led to over 200 cases per officer in our small teams inherited from pre-Publica. We have responded by changing processes and managing complaints more effectively, lowering our case numbers by around 60% and this improvement process will continue, making sure that we investigate all complaints in a timely manner and reduce the backlog from the pandemic.

We are now moving to the next phase of our improvement. This will be based on advice provided by national experts in the Planning Advisory Service and led by our newly appointed Assistant Director for Planning and Sustainability. It will apply the partnership approach and Publica Operating Model to the whole service which we anticipate will deliver significant performance gains and over £400k savings for our partner councils. It will include:

- Streamlining of reports for simple applications
- Updated fee structure for paid services to bring us in line with council standards
- Update our consultation process to make sure the right consultees are engaged on the right applications
- Work with councils to review our schemes of delegation to enhance engagement with ward members and support swift decision making for customers
- Change the way applications can be negotiated to make it more efficient and limit applications that continuously change, using up officer time

## **Meeting the financial challenges of our partner councils**

We are committed to delivering efficiencies to help the partner councils meet their financial challenge after a decade of austerity, continuing local government funding uncertainty, rapidly increasing delivery costs and high inflation putting council finances under significant strain.

### **The evolution of the Publica Innovation Programme in Future Publica**

We launched the Publica Innovation Programme in 2022, working with the partner councils and the Shareholder Forum to look at options for increasing income and driving more efficiency while maintaining service levels, or improving them.

The savings and income we identified have now been consolidated along with the ongoing application of the Publica Operating Model into Future Publica. Future Publica will deliver an initial £2M of additional annual savings on top of the £2.9M already achieved since the partnership formed. Savings made through the Publica partnership to date have totalled £14M, almost double the target of the original business case. This has allowed the partner councils over recent years to avoid the challenging financial decisions many councils across the country have had to make, invest in their local areas and be in a better financial position than many other councils are now facing.

We estimate the partner councils would have to pay an additional £6.5M up to 2026 if they provided the same services in a standalone district council model. However, we know we now need to go

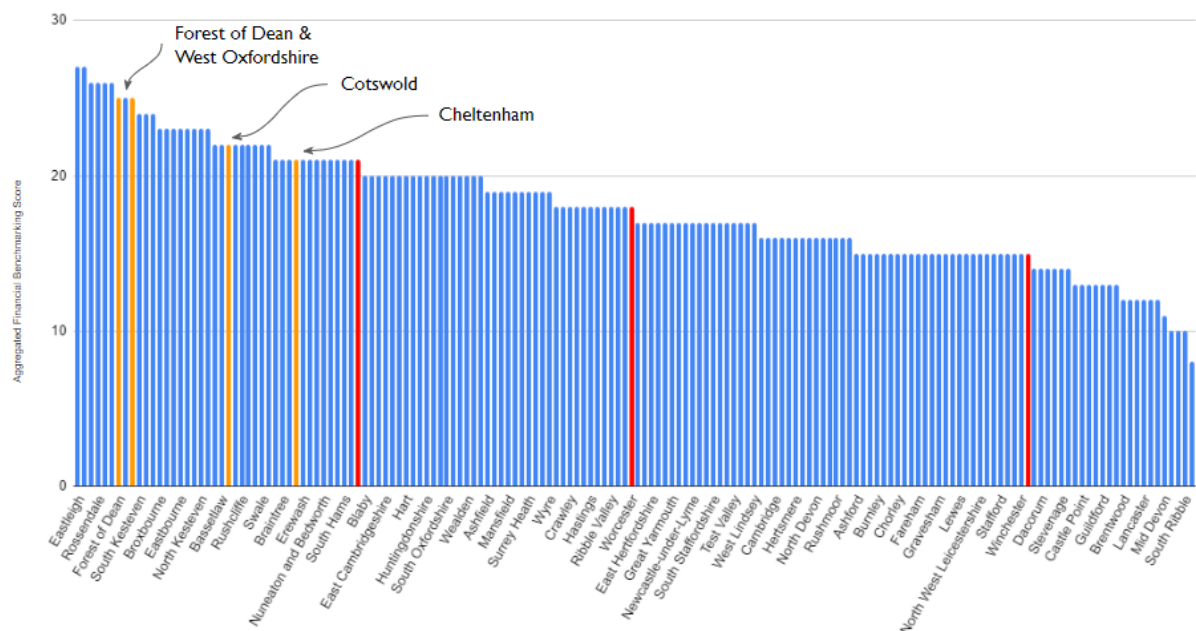
further and faster to meet the current challenge. We are committed to delivering the £2M savings set out in Future Publica and also pushing for further savings over the next three years. The delivery of Future Publica savings is now one of our highest priorities and progress is being driven forward at pace by senior management.

### Is Publica providing value for money?

The Local Government Association (LGA) has one of the most comprehensive national benchmarking toolkits which produces headline reports for each local authority area. The LGA headline reports provide a resource for comparing district council performance and value for money.

Based on the aggregation of headline financial indicators from LG Inform, the chart below shows the shareholder council's cost per head of population. It illustrates their financial performance is in the top quartile compared to other district authorities nationally. The Shareholder Councils all have high scores indicating that they are low cost. They are marked in orange and are located on the left of the chart with the best performing councils.

LG Inform Aggregate Financial Metric Benchmarking for District Councils (Cost Per Head of Population)



## Publica financial review of 2022/23

This year we have delivered additional savings and modernisation and we are planning significantly larger savings over the next three years underpinned by our self-service web, Salesforce and Customer Portal offerings. The development in this year will pay financial dividends in 2023/24 and beyond as transactions are switched from face to face and phone to self-service. Underlying savings within the 2022/23 financial year were £70,000 as set out in the business case for Publica and in addition to that base budget reduction Publica returned a further £450,000 of one off savings back to our partner councils.

The savings made in 2022/23 bring the total underlying budget savings to £2.9m since the formation of Publica set against a target of £1.9m at this stage of the business case. In addition to this underlying budget reduction Publica has delivered back to the partner Councils a total of £2.5m of one-off savings through a six year track record of delivering the service within the budget envelope allowing partners to reinvest these funds in priorities of the councils.

Additional activities carried out over the year include administering additional residential grant streams in respect of energy and significant work to support refugee and asylum seeker programmes. As a trusted 'not for profit' partner we have sought to pick up most of the additional work within the core contract with variations only being sought where additional expenses were incurred.

Details of spend to budget are set out below.

**TABLE 1 : BUDGET VS ACTUAL 2022/23**

	Budget	Actual	(+) / -
	£000s	£000s	£000s
<b>Sales</b>			
<b>Contract Income</b>	<b>29,795</b>	<b>29,795</b>	<b>(0)</b>
<b>Direct Costs:</b>			
Salaries (Inc oncosts)	(25,540)	(24,134)	(1,406)
Agency Costs	(30)	(829)	799
Contractor Costs	0	(57)	57
Employee Transport & Travel	(299)	(150)	(149)
Other Staff costs	(510)	(600)	90
<b>Gross Surplus</b>	<b>3,416</b>	<b>4,025</b>	<b>(609)</b>
Administration Expenses	(1,980)	(2,189)	209
Other Operating Expenses	(4)	(4)	0
<b>Operating Surplus</b>	<b>1,432</b>	<b>1,832</b>	<b>(400)</b>
Net Interest (Payable)/ Receivable	3	76	(73)
Surplus before Tax	<b>1,435</b>	<b>1,908</b>	<b>(473)</b>
Tax	0	(22)	22
Contract Fee Refund	(1,419)	(1,419)	0
Retained Surplus	(16)	(16)	0
<b>Additional Surplus / (Deficit) Distribution</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>451</b>	<b>(451)</b>

**Bringing in external funding**

During the year Publica colleagues worked together with partner Councils to identify and access additional external funding to support delivery of new projects. Most notably in 2022/23 bids were successfully made to access funds in respect of:-

UK Shared Prosperity Fund	£3.0m
Rural England Prosperity Fund	£2.1m
Local Authority Housing Fund	£4.4m
Asylum/Ukraine Funding	£1.8m

## Our performance of key services across the year **(will be infographic in designed version)**

<p>Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>87% of planning applications across the partnership are within agreed time limits, which is up from 75% last year</li> <li>Based on an analysis of national planning performance, the partnership are amongst the top 30 most improved Councils.</li> </ul>	<p>Waste</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recycling Rates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CDC - 57%</li> <li>FODDC - 54%</li> <li>WODC - 60%</li> </ul> </li> <li>Environmental Services Innovation Programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>25% reduction in missed bins from 21/22 baseline</li> <li>98.6T reduction in Co2</li> <li>£850k additional income and savings</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IIP Bronze Award</li> <li>1 in 10 staff have been promoted/achieved career progression in the last year</li> <li>40% less sickness than the most recent Local Government Benchmarks</li> </ul>	
<p>Customer Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From March 23, the partnership has consistently been in the top 10 councils nationally for telephone customer satisfaction</li> <li>16,000 reduction in call volumes since the last report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt;50% of all customers are signed up for e-billing</li> <li>&gt;15000 households use digital services to manage online council tax and benefits payments</li> <li>Shortlisted for 3 Local Government Chronicle national awards</li> </ul>

## **Planet: Responding to the climate emergency**

Tackling climate change is the challenge of our generation, and with each shareholder council declaring a climate emergency as well as an ecological/biodiversity emergency, our response is central to all we do.

### **Rolling out Carbon Literacy training to staff**

Publica is now a Bronze Carbon Literate Organisation with more than 70 key staff, including our senior managers, participating in carbon literacy training as we look to embed our response to the climate emergency in everything we do. This will be pushed forward over the coming years as we aim for at least 50% (ideally 100%) of our staff to have participated in carbon literacy training by 2025.

### **Aurora Project - Working with international partners to tackle climate change in the Forest of Dean**

Forest of Dean District Council has been working with local, regional and international partners over the past 18 months, exploring how local communities can lower their carbon footprint. This year the Council has been working with a local leisure centre and secondary school to help reduce carbon emissions and energy costs by installing solar panels on their roof and through a partnership with Big Solar Co-op, shares will then be available for residents and community members to purchase to work together towards a greener future.

### **Making sure we consider the climate impact of every decision**

The innovative Climate Impact Assessment Tool is a project evaluation tool designed to embed climate and social considerations within project development and decision making processes, making sure we consider our impact on the environment in every decision. It also includes social considerations to reflect community and wellbeing priorities, equalities impacts, and Healthy Place Shaping principles - many of which are linked to climate and environment.

The purpose of the tool is two-fold: first, it will assist officers in evaluating the climate, environmental and social impacts of their projects and make improvements where needed. Second, it will assist councillors with the decision-making process as the output of the tool is appended to formal decision papers where applicable.

### **Supporting partnership retrofit schemes to reduce carbon emissions**

The partnership has played key roles in rolling out a number of funding schemes to help local people retrofit their homes. This has included the Local Authority Delivery Scheme providing funding for insulation and low carbon heating, and the Home Upgrades Grant which helps with energy performance and heating for off gas grid homes. We estimate over 800 households have been helped through the schemes, unlocking more than £700,000 of funding and 2000 tonnes of lifetime carbon savings made.



### **Giving the Greenlight for community climate action**

This year, in partnership with West Oxfordshire District Council, we delivered the innovative Greenlight project which provides a digital platform for residents to share best practice and come together to tackle the climate emergency. As the platform develops we hope it will provide community resources, guidance and support for residents to start their own climate action projects. Following the initial rollout in West Oxfordshire, we will look to roll it out across the other partners.

### **Continuing to reduce the carbon footprint of council operations**

This year has seen the introduction of more electric vehicles. Following on from the successful decarbonisation schemes at the Forest of Dean Council offices and Cotswold leisure centres, we now have an agreement to install solar panels on council buildings in Cirencester and Witney. We have also secured funding to decarbonise Carterton Leisure Centre which currently accounts for 30% of West Oxfordshire District Council's emissions.

### **Working in an agile way to reduce our carbon footprint**

Our work to create a modern, agile working environment has continued this year with all three councils agreeing to consolidate the amount of office space used by the organisation, reducing our carbon footprint and also allowing us to make better use of our estates to generate income.

We continue to improve our IT systems with the launch of Microsoft Teams this year for councillors and staff, to be followed by full integration into the Microsoft suite over the coming years. This will enable us to operate more efficiently, reduce the need for business travel and provide a more attractive work environment to help recruitment.

### **Securing funding to tackle climate change**

This year, the Forest of Dean has been successful in securing £300,000 through the Innovate UK Fast Followers programme. As one of only 21 councils in the country to receive the funding, the money will allow the whole partnership to faster train staff in carbon literacy, bring in specialist roles to research how we overcome barriers in the community to reaching net-zero.

## **People: supporting staff to deliver fantastic services**

We will only accomplish our aims and deliver the partner council priorities if the very best people work for the partnership. We need to use the advantages we have in our Teckal partnership model to bring in people who are enthusiastic about change and are committed to delivering great public services.

The key areas for development of our people are linked with the Investors in People framework (IIP). This nationally recognised framework assists us in continuing to improve Publica as a 'Great Place to Work' and more progress has been made this year to create an offer to prospective candidates that stands out from the standard public sector employment offer and also best supports the great staff we already have.

### **Rewarding and recognising high performance**

Our renewed approach to recognising great performance by staff has landed very well, with many staff being nominated for awards by colleagues and it is highlighting how many dedicated, creative and hard working staff we have across the partnership working every day to deliver services for the partners councils.

### **Learning Champions leading the way to improve our training offer**

The best candidates want to see that their employer will offer them high quality training and learning to progress their careers. Following our improvements to our training suite, this year we launched a learning champions scheme with champions coming from across the partnership to further develop the training offer and support colleagues to access training opportunities.

#### **Providing better support for our staff**

To attract the best staff and retain our current staff we need a great support and benefits offer. We have renewed the excellent Mediacash offer, along with upgrading the Employee Assistance Programme through Spectrum Life, offering counselling, legal support and wellbeing services.

#### **Our staff making a difference in communities**

Many of the teams across Publica have taken up the two days free volunteering we offer to help local communities. In July, our Community Wellbeing Team based in Coleford got together to redecorate the Youth Club in Blakeney, while staff from all three councils got involved in this year's Great British Spring Clean, litter picking in their local areas. In total staff have volunteered 318 hours to support local causes this year.

#### **Developing our leadership to improve the organisation and services**

A well performing organisation is led by inspiring, dynamic and ambitious leaders. We continue to develop our leaders through our evolving leadership development programme and we have also welcomed new leaders this year in HR, Planning, corporate governance and democratic services to help apply our operating model and deliver our ambitions. We will also be looking to conduct a review of senior management in the coming year to ensure we have the right structure in place to lead the company forward.

## **Place: Delivering for businesses and communities**

Across the partnership we all share the same ambition to not only deliver great council services, but also deliver against the local priorities for each district area. Through our partnership approach we have the capacity to do far more in both areas, being flexible where we need to be and sharing resources and ideas.

Each partner council has its own ambitions and we have made some great progress against them over the past year, making a real and measurable difference to the lives of residents and businesses.

We are incredibly proud of the amazing work that has been delivered in communities across the partnership, working hand in hand with councillors, council leadership teams, local organisations and our residents. Here we highlight just some of the fantastic work that has been done over the past year.

#### **Becoming a national leader in delivering Local Plans**

After winning initial funding to become part of the government's PropTech Fund (a national project to apply digital methods of engagement to improve local plan consultations) we have gone from strength to strength, being awarded another two rounds of funding to continue the work and we are now being held up as an example to other councils of how to run Local Plan consultations. We have seen numbers of people responding to consultations increase by over 30%. We will be applying our learning to big consultations coming up in Cotswold, Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire next year.

#### **Leading the way in tackling sewage in our waterways**

West Oxfordshire District Council has made significant strides in limiting sewage pollution in waterways across the district through close working with Thames Water and local organisations. A new planning condition has been applied, requiring new homes to have suitable sewage treatment capacity. Thames Water are better at engaging with planning applications and the council held a sold out Waterways Day bringing local organisations together to explore how to tackle the issue. This approach is being rolled out across the partnership with activity expected in Cotswold this coming year.

### **Delivering affordable housing for local people**

All the partner councils want to deliver affordable housing where the market is not delivering sufficiently to meet the needs of local people. We have continued to deliver affordable housing in partnership with developers and housing providers, pushing the boundaries with exemplar design to maximise the delivery of development schemes that are sustainable and align with net-zero carbon ambitions. This year has seen over [awaiting figure] affordable homes built across Cotswold, Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire districts.

### **Providing leisure services for local residents**

A lot of work has gone on across the partnership this year to help people improve their health, wellbeing and fitness. On top of new playing pitch strategies being approved at all three councils there have also been other significant successes:

- West Oxfordshire has also secured just over £1M through developer contributions to improve the provision of sport and leisure facilities in the district.
- Cotswold has seen ongoing delivery against the ambition of the 'Active Cotswold' programme with 'fit kits' being introduced in care homes to allow people with limited mobility to exercise and a joint exercise programme being launched district wide in partnership with Mr Motivator.
- The Forest of Dean Communities Team has worked with Freedom Leisure to deliver free, fully inclusive Gentle Games sessions down or standing up. Games include curling, skittles and golf and are a great way to socialise and play games in a relaxed environment.

### **Bringing in funding through the Prosperity Funds**

Over the past year the partnership has been successful in securing £5,139,952 in funding through the Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund. We were able to lean on our partnership model and put project teams in place to ensure the funding was secured and we can use it to support local businesses.

The funding will deliver a wide range of support including grant schemes for local businesses, work to improve connectivity by installing new infrastructure and transport options, and work to upgrade and improve village halls.

### **Partnership fundraising projects go from strength to strength**

The incredibly successful Crowdfund Cotswold continues to generate funding for amazing local projects, with many coming to fruition this year, including a new skate park in Fairford, wildflower planting, solar panels for an open air pool, a community energy project and support for isolated, elderly residents. This year, West Oxfordshire also agreed to adopt this model with the Westhive crowdfunding platform launched in October 2023. The lottery approach at Forest of Dean also continues to provide valuable support to local organisations, with more than £43,000 raised for local causes and over £6,000 won by local residents.

### **The power of partnerships**

Working in partnership, whether across the Publica partnership, or with external partners, is delivering results across our communities. Here are just a few examples from this year:

#### *Inspiring our next generation*

The Inspiring the Forest project is being delivered across the Forest Economic Partnership involving local businesses, the district council, schools and other partners. It aims to raise career aspirations for young people and prepare them for a future career. This year we launched the project with an event at Gloucestershire College in Coleford with over 700 Year 10 students meeting business from across the Forest of Dean's diverse economy.

#### *Helping families with activities for children*

The Holiday Activities Fund (HAF) and YouMove projects in Cotswold District and West Oxfordshire are both partnership schemes providing support for families with children on free-school meals, helping the children access activities and learning they may otherwise not be able to afford. They both receive significant support from officers to be delivered in our districts and this year has been another successful year for both with over 2000 children attending the HAF sessions.

#### **Supporting our economies to grow**

In all three districts the partnership is making a meaningful impact supporting local economies. West Oxfordshire District Council completed the purchase of Marriotts Walk Shopping Centre in Witney to help boost the town centre with new tenants already on board along with displays that have made a positive impact in the local community

At Cotswold we have seen the Green Economic Growth Strategy continuing to deliver with the new businesses popping up across the district and the council supporting the exciting Innovation Village at the Royal Agricultural University.

In the Forest of Dean the council is being held up as a case study for its delivery of the £20M Levelling Up Fund improvements which have seen really positive progress this year. The Business Start Up Grants offered by the council continue to get traction, supporting new local start-ups get off the ground with six businesses supported this year.

#### **Doing more to manage the risk of flooding**

Over recent years all three districts have experienced flooding events affecting property, residents and businesses. We have been working hard to do more within the district council remit to prevent flooding introducing a new inspection approach for critical watercourses on private land and exploring flood prevention schemes.

## **Award winning partnership recognised for best practice**

Over recent years we have seen many projects delivered across the partnership nominated for and winning awards, staff contributing to national discussions and teams being held up for best practice. Here are some of the examples from this year:

#### **The Publica partnership at the Local Government Chronicle Awards**

Following the award win last year for the Crowdfund Cotswold campaign, the partnership was once again well represented at this year's LGC Awards, often against councils many times the size and with far more resources. We were shortlisted for Campaign of the Year (WODC LoyalFree campaign),

Public/ Public Partnership (FODDC Destination Lydney Harbour) and Environmental Services (CDC/ FODDC/ WODC Environmental Services Improvement Programme)

#### **Destination Lydney harbour wins CPRE Gloucestershire Award**

The Destination Lydney Harbour project to regenerate the popular historic area in the Forest of Dean won the Campaign to Protect Rural England award, recognising the 'outstanding' contribution to the county and project's work to protect and regenerate the area.

#### **Communications and Marketing Team continues to win awards**

Following a number of award wins and nominations over the past two years, the Communications and Marketing this year won the Silver Award for the best Public Sector Campaign at the CIPR PRide awards.

#### **Building Control wins Best High Volume New Housing Development award**

The team won the Local Authority Building Control award for supporting Hills Homes Developments deliver a housing development in Tetbury. The award recognises best practice in delivering new homes. The Cotswold District Council Building Control team have also been nominated for the Local Authority Building Control Team of the Year award via nomination(s) from customers!

#### **Publica held up as best practice example of a Teckal company used for public services**

This year Publica was part of a series of podcasts by renowned legal firm Trowers and Hamlin's looking at different public service delivery models. Our executives were interviewed about how the partnership was 'making a real difference' and the benefits the partnership Teckal approach has brought to service delivery and the shareholder councils.

#### **Leading the way on supporting mental health**

Our officers Philippa Lowe and Gary Deighton spoke at the national Kings Fund integrated care in practice conference about the work of the Forest of Dean Integrated Locality Partnership to support people with mental health.

#### **Innovating on tackling the climate emergency**

Our Climate Impact Assessment Tool won a bronze innovation award at the iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards 2023 and has been shared with over 40 local authorities nationally to be adapted and used.

## **Areas of focus for the coming year**

Over the coming year we have a number of areas of focus where we will be continuing to improve service delivery, meet our council priorities and enhance our role as an employer. These areas of focus are rooted in delivery of our Business Plan along with delivering Future Publica and the Council Corporate Plans.

#### **Delivering Future Publica and the Business Plan**

- Improvements in Planning Services including Development Management and Planning policy. This will include changes to processes, enhanced collaboration and improving structures to make the teams more efficient. We are also exploring a range of new self-serve

digital functions to improve the experience for customers and residents at the same time. These improvements aim to deliver top quartile performance alongside a reduction in operating costs of at least £400K.

- Making more services available online. Our work has already delivered a significant shift in how customers contact the councils. We have introduced new ways for customers to report concerns, reply and pay for services online. As more customers use these new communication channels, fewer will contact us by telephone or come into reception, saving at least £250k, and allowing us to focus those traditional channels for the people who need them and for the most complicated enquiries.
- Modernising our approach to Asset Management. The scale of the Publica partnership has enabled the creation of a more resilient and capable organisation and partnership, which would not have been possible at a single district council. We have seen a significant acceleration in our ability to effectively manage and optimise the councils' assets over the last year. As this team matures it will be able to reduce its dependency on external advisors, reduce its operating costs and increase income, delivering £200k in additional revenue and savings.
- We have built a strong relationship with Ubico. This has already delivered significant financial and service-related benefits through the Environmental Services Innovation Programme but we know there is more we can do. We will continue to develop and grow this partnership, we have already identified further potential savings for the councils, this is over and above the savings that Publica can deliver.

### **A Great Place to Work**

Over the coming year we have more significant improvements planned through a new HR strategy which is focussed on:

- Improving our culture through a new behaviours competency framework for staff alongside an improved appraisal process
- Further developing our offer to staff by offering more employee wellbeing support, making sure we have proper succession planning and talent mapping in place, improving our work around equality and diversity inclusion and also reviewing our approach to pay and reward
- Building talent in-house and improving recruitment through focussed leadership development, growing our in-house recruitment team and continuing to improve our learning offer
- Making sure we are compliant as an organisation by renewing our HR policies, training our managers and putting in place a gender pay gap action plan.
- Conducting a senior management review to ensure we have the right management structure to lead the company

### **Tackling the climate emergency**

- Continuing our staff carbon literacy training rollout
- Continuing to reduce our carbon footprint by enhancing the agile working approach, adapting our buildings and looking at different fleet options
- Supporting council priority climate projects across the partnership

### **Place: delivering for businesses and our communities**

The Place agenda is largely set through the partner council corporate plans and we will support the councils in developing those plans where needed and then delivering the priorities set within them. This will develop over the year with Forest of Dean and Cotswold expected to update their plans, but some of the major projects as of September 2023 include:

- Updates to Local Plans at Cotswold, Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire

- Delivery of the projects funded through the SPF and REPF funding
- Working to tackle waterway contamination
- Delivery of community funding schemes
- Changes to waste services at Forest of Dean District Council and working with Cotswold and West Oxfordshire on future options for their service
- Major regeneration schemes across the partnership
- Delivery of affordable housing schemes and exploration of how to best do this
- Supporting residents through the continuing cost of living crisis
- Support for health, wellbeing and community cohesion across the partnership
- A new depot and waste service at Forest of Dean District Council
- A strategic review of Leisure at West Oxfordshire District Council