



# Ribble Valley Borough Council Productivity Plan 2024/25

## Background

Ribble Valley Borough Council (RVBC) is a local government district with borough status within the non-metropolitan county of Lancashire, the council offices are based in Clitheroe. The borough is rural in nature and has an area of 583Km<sup>2</sup>. The total population of the district at the 2021 Census was 61,561.

Following the 2023 Boundary Review, the Ribble Valley County Constituency has an electorate of 75,993 which is made up of 27 wards, represented by 40 Councillors. Following the results of the May 2023 United Kingdom local elections, the Conservatives remained the largest party but lost their majority, leaving the council under no overall control.

As of 31 March 2024 the Council employs 234 staff (195.35 FTE) of which 158 were full-time and 76 part-time to deliver the essential services relied upon by our residents, businesses and visitors.

As a council we want to ensure that we continue to deliver our strong track record of efficient, high-quality services based on the strong sense of place that we already have.

Recent years have seen some tough times and both for this next year and beyond, our focus is to support and empower our residents, businesses, partnerships, and staff. We are building on our learning and experiences whilst continuing to successfully deliver and develop those services vital to our residents and the area.

## Introduction

This productivity plan has been produced in response to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' (DLUHC) review of productivity in local government and outlined in the Local Government Finance Settlement 2024/25. Productivity plans must be submitted and published on the council website by 19 July 2024 (the original date for recess of Parliament) as this remains government policy and will continue to be so unless and until government changes the policy.

As requested this plan sets out how we will reduce waste and transform service delivery to ensure that we are providing value for money for our residents.

The DLUHC guidance has stressed that councils should update the published plans and report on progress on a regular basis going forward.

## Executive Summary

Improving productivity, performance and efficiency has been a theme running through service delivery across RVBC for many years. We are committed to providing 'value for money' services whilst maintaining one of the lowest council tax rates in England.

This Productivity Plan outlines many of the activities we are undertaking to ensure we continue to fulfil this commitment whilst at the same time delivering high quality services and addressing the Goals set out in our Corporate Plan. We are particularly proud of the following:

- Customer Services
  - The Council prides itself on the quality and response times of our Contact Centre Customer Services team, and we are confident that telephone calls are answered within 20 seconds.
  - We maintain a cash office with Monday to Friday opening hours. This service is highly regarded and rated especially by our elderly residents and those who live in rural areas wishing to make payments in person. From 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024 we had 8,569 residents making payments in person at the Council's cash office.
  - In 2023/24 the council collected 99.12% of council tax, which is thanks both to prompt payment by residents and also the diligence of the council's collection team.
- Ribble Valley Borough Council has been shortlisted as a 2024 finalist by the Institute Of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) for the Team Awards: Revenues and / or Local Taxation (District). The winner will be announced in October 2024.
- Provision of office space for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) within the council offices, to help ensure continued presence of the JobCentre Plus service within the borough for our residents.
- The council maintains weekly refuse collections with alternate weeks for recyclable and green waste using the same number of vehicles and staffing numbers as previously used in the past.
- We are one of the few debt-free councils in the country, with no external borrowing.
- Even though the property count for the borough over the last 10 years has risen by over 17% - 25,370 to 29,730 (*compared to 9% All English Authorities*), our staff numbers have remained around the same levels, ensuring heightened levels of efficiency and productivity.
- The Ribble Valley Community Safety partnership (CSP) area has the lowest recorded crime rate 38 per 1000 population for headline offences of the 296 CSPs in England and Wales. This also highlights that Ribble Valley has the lowest crime rate in the Lancashire-14 area which comprises the 12 local authorities within the Lancashire County Council administrative boundary, along with the additional unitary authorities of Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool.

## Productivity Plan 2024/25

Our plan for 2024 is arranged around the four themes suggested by government:

### Theme 1: Transforming service design and delivery to make better use of resources

#### Financial sustainability

Through good management practices and sound financial control the council has the platform and expertise to set a balanced budget. The budget is considered and approved or recommended by our Budget Working Group, Service Committees, Policy and Finance Committee and finally by Full Council.

A revenue budget and council tax requirement for 2024/25 was approved at the Full Council meeting on 5 March 2024. This resulted in a Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2024/25 (excluding Parish precepts) of £4,322,041. This saw the council in the bottom quartile of districts for the lowest Band D council tax, and the lowest in Lancashire, even after having increased its change by the maximum permitted of £5 to £170.69. The Council Tax Collection fund assumes a very high collection rate of 99.25%, which is largely met due to the diligence of the council's revenues team (actual 99.12% for 2023/24). The team has been shortlisted as a 2024 finalist by the Institute Of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) for the Team Awards: Revenues and / or Local Taxation (District). The winner will be announced in October 2024.

The council's financial position is helped by the valuable work of the cross-party Budget Working Group which reports to the council's Policy and Finance Committee. This working group allows for in-depth and considered discussion and analysis of the council's financial position away from the committee meetings and allowing members to have a more informed understanding. This adds robustness to the formal decisions that are then made by the Policy and Finance Committee.

This is a way of working on the council's budget and other key financial matters that has long been in place but has more recently been seen echoed at neighbouring councils.

The work of the Budget Working Group culminates in the eventual preparation of a [Detailed Budget Book 2024/25](#) and also a [Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 to 2028/29](#) (MTFS) which considers our budget pressures in the medium to longer term.

Work on the revenue budget begins with clear guidance issued to service committees by the Budget Working Group through the Policy and Finance Committee. This includes stipulations at minimum levels of additional income generation from fees and charges increases, and stipulations that any requests for growth items within the budget (other than for such items as inflation) must be funded from matching identified savings.

The Budget Forecast shows some potentially substantial savings being needed in future years; however, these forecasts are fraught with uncertainty around the future of local government finance, making longer-term financial planning inherently difficult.

<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>Budget Gap £'000</b>
2024/25	0
2025/26	154
2026/27	1,630
2027/28	1,884
2028/29	2,166
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,833</b>

The work of the Budget working Group has included addressing these gaps, with early consideration of a savings and transformation plan for future years, including:

- Expenditure Related
  - Removal of one-off items from the base budget, such as the Local Plan and the current one-off additional funding for the operation of the Castle Museum.
  - Efficiency and transformation savings such as efficiency reductions within service committees, cash limiting non-salary budgets and increasing the staff turnover level allowed for in the budget (currently 4%).
- Income Related
  - Increase fees and charges to allow for a greater increase than the 2.5% allowed for in the future years of the budget forecast.
  - Review of income streams.
  - Allowing for a greater increase in the taxbase in the forecast. We are currently seeing higher levels of increase to the taxbase than the forecast.
  - Review the level of council tax surplus/deficit that is forecast in future years.
- General Fund Balances and Earmarked Reserves
  - Increase the level of General Fund Balances used to support the budget in future years.
  - Consider how Earmarked Reserves could be used to fund specific items in the budget forecast.

Our financial sustainability is seen through a debt free balance sheet, carefully considered reserves, and a fully funded five-year capital programme (£12.984m before 2023/24 slippage) with substantial investment in our services (largely funded by the aforementioned reserves), helping to drive economic, effective, efficient and equitable services for our residents, businesses and visitors. Such investment is reviewed annually to take account of any developing best practice in service delivery or efficiencies that can be achieved.

Our capital programme includes 'Invest to Save' schemes. As an example, investment in the provision of solar power at the main council offices and energy efficiency measure at the council's swimming pool in order to reduce ongoing energy costs and also helping us meet our aspiration to be 'carbon neutral' by 2030.

Through past efficiency drives we have streamlined our management structure to a model that best fits the size of the council, although this can on occasions present issues when vacancies arrive as we operate to capacity on a day-to-day basis.

We continue to have a detailed analysis of all staffing vacancies as they occur, with Heads of Service being required to provide options for replacement or non-replacement of staff, together with potential alternative staffing structures. These are then appraised by the council's Corporate Management Team, with a decision then made on the best way forward from a corporate perspective.

Whilst the authority population and property numbers have grown substantially in recent years (17% increase over the last 10 years from 25,370 to 29,730), we have continued to provide many of our services, including key services such as refuse collection, on the same vehicle and staffing numbers as in the past, ensuring heightened levels of efficiency.

Unlike many authorities this council also benefits from added flexibility in the provision of its key services due to them all being provided in-house. This has helped protect the council from the many contract price increases seen at other authorities due to new service requirements, statutory changes or inflationary costs experienced through such items as volatile energy costs, interest rates and general inflation.

Good strategic planning also means aligning financial and service planning. The new [Corporate Plan 2023/2027](#) was approved and adopted by Policy and Finance Committee on 9 April 2024. Four new Goals identified in the plan set the context for the allocation of resources within the council's budget.

Our Goals for a successful and sustainable council of the future are:

1. Residents, their health, and wellbeing: Creating flourishing, healthy, and happy communities
2. Valuing our Place and our Environment: Making the Ribble Valley a place we want to be by creating a safer, stronger, greener, and cleaner Borough
3. Building a Strong Economy: Sustaining a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley
4. Continue to be a well-managed Council: Providing efficient services based on identified customer needs

The council operate a suite of performance indicators which reflect the council's Corporate Plan and its Goals. As the Corporate Plan was recently fully revised following local elections in 2023, this has driven a full review to establish the most useful measures of performance for us to use and report to elected members for scrutiny.

Added to this, our resident surveys offer a valuable insight into the external perception of how the council is performing through the eyes of our residents in such areas as value for money and satisfaction levels with services, offering us further opportunities to review and improve.

Grant funding to our communities through a variety of highly valued grant schemes helps the council to widen its reach and better enable it to satisfy its Goals through the Third Sector and our 42 Town and Parish Council's. These community groups are often better able to provide targeted help to our residents, some of which live within very remote areas of our sparsely populated and rural borough.

We also work closely with other organisations to combat such areas as anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and rural isolation. Data for Community Safety Partnerships areas shows that in the year ending March 2023 Ribble Valley has the lowest recorded crime rate 38 per 1000 population for headline offences of the 296 Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) in England and Wales. This also highlights the fact that Ribble Valley has the lowest crime rate in the Lancashire-14 area (which

comprises the 12 local authorities within the Lancashire County Council administrative boundary, along with the additional unitary authorities of Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool).

Additionally we have worked with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through the provision of office space within the council offices, allowing the council to help ensure continued presence of the JobCentre Plus service within the borough for our residents.

As the council is so sparsely populated and has an aging population, it must make careful measured decisions on how it provides its services to its residents. As such the council has an increasing number of services that it provides online. The contact centre provides an outstanding service where most queries are answered at first point of contact, and with calls ordinarily answered within 20 seconds. A highly valued service amongst our residents is our face-to-face cash office operated within the main council offices meeting the needs of a wide demographic of the boroughs population (from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024 we had 8,569 residents making use of the service)

## Theme 2: Using technology and data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

We use technology and data to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our business processes by:

- continually reviewing our IT systems and upgrading them where possible to take advantage of advances in technology. However, there is a significant cost involved in replacing older systems, requiring cost/benefit judgements before they are considered for inclusion in the Capital Programme.
- routinely using data quality audits and by putting in place data quality improvement plans to address any issues.
- maintaining a set of clear and robust information governance processes to make sure data is kept safe, shared and used appropriately.
- continually reviewing and improving customer experience by providing a more accessible, aligned and coherent experience when anyone contacts us, with clear feedback so that we can continue to improve customer satisfaction across all services.
- publish data on the council's website to meet requirements under the Transparency Regulations.
- continually strive to add to the number of services that we are able to provide online through the council website
- improved customer experience through past investment in the redesign of the corporate website and meeting Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) requirements to improve accessibility.
- investment in our Committee Administration processes to improve services for residents, members and officers. This has also added further layers of security around committee papers and creates print and postage savings.

### Five Year Capital Programme Investment in ICT Systems and Infrastructure

- Replacement PCs and Laptops for Officers and Members (£114k).
- Firewall Refresh (£24k).
- Asset Management Software Upgrade (£27k).
- Software Upgrade for Regulatory Services (£189k).
- Cyber Security (£187k including external funding).
- HR e-Recruitment System (£13k).
- ICT and Network Infrastructure (£147k).

This extensive investment will enable the council to provide better integrated services providing efficiencies in the way the council provides its services and a more seamless experience for our customers. It will also allow the council to further invest in the protection of its services from external cyber threats.

As we provide all of our key services in-house, we have a reduced need for data sharing. In many respects this adds to the efficiency and responsiveness in the provision of our services.

### Theme 3: Reducing wasteful spend and improving efficiency

Through expert and considered financial management we believe we continue to reduce wasteful spend across departments. The Council has established processes in place to ensure spend is directed to essential service delivery, this also includes having:

- a culture of strong financial management and awareness resulting from embedding good practice and process throughout our delivery of services.
- a robust framework of financial management and controls to support effective budget monitoring that has reduced all significant wasteful spend found across departments.
- a robust framework of financial management and controls to support effective budget monitoring helping identify potential areas for future savings year-to-year.
- we operate a committee system which provides much wider challenge and scrutiny by all members. In addition to this regular reporting to services committee members and the main Policy and Finance Committee, there are periodic reports to the Budget Working Group and Corporate Management Team. These reports cover both revenue and capital spend.
- there is full scrutiny, approval and monitoring against key financial documents such as the Prudential Code, Capital and Treasury Management Strategy and Treasury Management Policies and Practices. Other documents that are key to our financial governance arrangements and are reviewed annually are the Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules. Our Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules have also been recently reviewed in respect of monetary limits, to enhance the efficiency of our procurement processes, whilst maintaining sound levels of control.
- external scrutiny is afforded through the publication of committee papers and other documents that meet the Transparency Regulations.
- a bidding process in relation to any significant investments in service development requiring capital funding or ongoing increases to revenue budgets. This process covers:
  - Environmental Considerations and Green Credentials
  - Equality and Diversity Considerations
  - Detailed Costings
  - Considerations of alternative solutions
  - Timescales for Completions
  - Risks to Completions
  - Revenue Implications
- example 'invest to save' investment in the provision of solar power to the main council offices and energy efficiency measure at the council's swimming pool in order to reduce ongoing energy costs and also helping us meet our aspiration to be 'carbon neutral' by 2030.
- the council does not place any ongoing reliance on the use of consultants in the day-to-day provision of its services. The use of consultants historically has largely been driven by extreme difficulties in recruitment to skilled positions when vacancies arise. Other uses of consultancy services have been one-off and project specific where the necessary skillset is not readily available in-house or where needed due to capacity issues. Our low level of consultancy and agency staffing costs in 2023/24 were estimated at (for context total Direct Staffing costs were £8.4m):
  - One-Off Specialist Advice and Support (£186k).
  - Short-Term Staffing to Support Service Delivery (£54k).
- consideration for our activity in relation to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, we are confident we can deliver on our commitment to ensure the diverse needs of Ribble Valley residents, visitors and staff who are all considered and addressed in the day-to-day activities of the council and future capital investment.
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training is provided online to all staff through a corporate training package which also covers a variety of other non-EDI topics. This integrated method

of corporate training has only recently commenced and so it is too early to assess the overall effectiveness at this stage, but it has been well received by staff. Other ad-hoc EDI training has been provided in the past which has given staff a clear foundation of knowledge, notably in respect of disabilities and reasonable adjustments.

- good industrial relations within the authority, this is underpinned by a responsible approach to the provision of [trade union facilities](#), which is reported in detail annually on a government maintained central website, to our Personnel Committee and published on the Council website.
- a Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy that is designed to ensure we continually improve our services and remedy any situations where we fail to meet our standards. All complaints are taken seriously, and we value customer feedback. We are committed to learning from complaints and regularly review policies and procedures should any complaints be upheld, in order to prevent similar complaints recurring. In 2023/24, we received a total of 67 formal complaints of those, 15 were considered to be outside the complaints policy or not for RVBC. Two complaints were made to the Ombudsman, however the Ombudsman decided not to investigate either complaint.
- a performance framework that is measured and monitored regularly reporting to the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and relevant service committees. Council services also look at performance in more detail and include key performance indicators (KPIs) pertinent to that service.
- the [Constitution](#), along with our [Draft Annual Governance Statement 2023/24](#) provide assurance regarding the Council's governance framework and how it provides accountability in all its actions.

## Theme 4: The barriers Government can help reduce or remove

Quite often we find that wasteful spend comes from the requirements and conditions placed on the council by central government, government departments, and or external organisations. We therefore need government recognition and support in the following areas:

- Uncertainty of funding and one-year settlements
  - 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.
  - 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.
  - Planning for the longer term, having to use resources where it is needed most, focussing on the immediateness of the current financial situation.
- Competitive bidding and funding
  - All councils would benefit from much greater flexibility to decide how to raise and spend money locally. Central prescription and ringfencing constrain our ability to allocate our resources effectively.
  - The wide range of separate one-off revenue and capital grant pots with onerous, costly and counter-productive bidding processes.
- Unnecessary spending and additional burden on officer time
  - Complying with rules, requirements, restrictions and processes imposed by central government and regulators.
  - Undertaking additional work requests with no regulation or funding, for example RVBC has completed the recent request by Government to visit all funeral directors. This has had an impact on officer time and resource without any form of recognition.
  - Complicated, inconsistent, and misaligned processes for submitting data returns to central government.
  - 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 compliance with their statutory codes.

- New food waste services requirements
  - insufficient funding for implementation of the new food waste service.
  - no consideration or funding towards reducing emissions from refuse vehicle fleet/operations or the replacement of diesel vehicles with electric or hydrogen refuse vehicles.
- National Policy and legislative barriers
  - We have also been hampered by the tendency of government 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.
  - Improve the joining-up between central government departments on issues including housing, homelessness prevention, asylum dispersal, biodiversity net gain (BNG) and Elections to prevent contradictory or inefficient requirements.
  - Increased flexibility around Council Tax and more support for local decision making
- Capacity barriers
  - Workforce - we continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining essential staff due to a substantial skills gap nationally for the provision of local government services. This is particularly the case in areas such as finance, planning and environmental health, and in areas where pay levels compare less favourably to other sectors.
  - We continue to take a proactive approach to recruiting and retaining staff to attempt to mitigate agency usage and keep this area of expenditure low.