



- **Population of 123,505 (ONS Mid-Year 2022)**
- **55,935 residential properties**
- **Population expected to grow to 134,299 by 2040**
- **Own housing stock of 4,991 properties**

Our vision: *Leading a community that is making Stroud district a better place to live, work and visit for everyone.*

## TRANSFORMATION

In 2020, the council's transformation programme **Fit for the Future** was launched and included four workstreams:

**Community Connections** improved the way we engage with our communities and delivered a set of [Community Engagement Principles](#). It also set out to provide greater empowerment to our communities including the introduction of a crowdfunding platform to help community projects collect the funding they require.

The workstream developed an asset-based community development (ABCD) culture that recognises and values the strength and energy of communities, helps empower them and reduces reliance on council services. We are currently embedding a framework of principles to guide our engagement with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector and with communities and are currently evaluating an ABCD pilot in a high-complaint neighbourhood. We found ways to listen to the local community about their thoughts and aspirations instead of council services deciding what it would do 'for them', and worked together to tackle concerns like bin-stores, Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) and fly tipping as well as celebrating the great things about the area. As a result, the community are more resilient, and the council has fewer complaints like ASB.

**Digital and Technology** stabilised and secured our ICT infrastructure and reduced the on-premise hosting in favour of cloud hosting.

A number of invest to save initiatives have also been made including:

- Investment in a Digital Platform which enables the development of web forms that increases self-service. This is a 'low-code' solution which gives us greater control and flexibility, reducing the need for reliance on expensive and resource intense change requests enabling us to build our own online processes and amend them easily based on customer feedback.
- Investment in the "My SDC Account" for Revenues and Benefits has resulted in a high volume of users signing up and thousands of transactions being processed solely online when these previously would have relied on interaction with a Council officer.
- We have invested in a focussed digital team and a series of new roles such as a business analyst.
- Drones were a recent investment to save the time and cost of scaffolding buildings for surveys. By using a drone to do the survey, the process is quicker, there is no lead-in time for scaffold to be erected or taken down again, it reduces the health and safety risk of needing staff to go up the scaffolding and onto the roof in the first place, and they also provide greater reach as they can get to places that scaffold could not.

9,268  
Council tax  
web users

## People and Organisational Development

launched our Values and Behaviours, introduced wellbeing and workforce initiatives including a leadership development programme, employee benefit platform and a new person-focused performance management programme called “Grow, Perform, Succeed”, which includes quarterly reviews of performance.

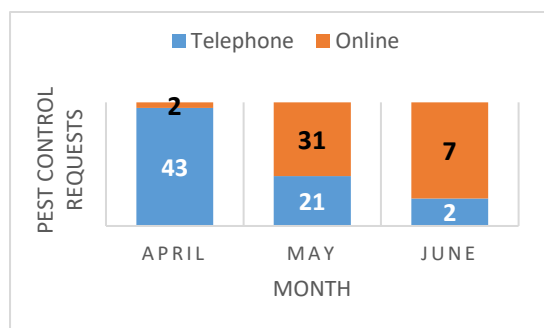
99.98% of the workforce are committed to helping the Council meet its goals. (Staff Survey 2024)



In 2022 we procured and implemented iTrent, a new HR/Payroll system which automated our annual leave, recruitment and onboarding processes significantly improving efficiency within the service and delivering an annual saving of £43,906.

We are proud of our track record in supporting our workforce with matters relating to wellbeing and diversity in the workplace and in 2023 we were **shortlisted for two awards** at the Local Government Chronicle Workforce awards. These were for “Best Wellbeing and Innovation” and “Best Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Employer”.

**Service Delivery** developed a Contact Centre strategy and introduced a process improvement programme with the goal to re-engineer our processes to increase operational effectiveness and efficiency and increase access to services online.



We invested 50% more resource in pest control and this has resulted in the expansion of the service and the generation of additional income, whilst also providing better support for the most vulnerable people in the district. There is now capacity to invest in technology improvements and we have just launched an online booking system which has increased the number of service requests made online.

The automation of back-office processes has not only saved us time but also enabled the rationalisation of systems delivering an annual saving of £16,000 so far.

We have recently launched a web-assistant and are undertaking the future development of webchat to triage enquiries, improve the customer experience and reduce the number of service requests as customers have their enquiries resolved immediately.

In 2023/24, SDC invested £150k in cab-based technology for waste and associated environmental services. The Alloy based system, present in vehicles via a tablet, links directly with our back office software representing a big step forward for channel shift, allowing residents to self-serve more easily. This is expected to generate a number of savings.

*Alloy system has led to a 20% reduction in missed bins reported online*

We recognise that there is an opportunity to use data more effectively to improve service level performance and outcomes. We are currently reviewing how we achieve this by upskilling existing resources and procuring connectors to link back office systems to unlock data and reduce silo working. We are soon to establish an Innovation Group which has the aim of identifying opportunities to improve the performance of the Council and it would be surprising if this Group did not identify opportunities for predictive analytics and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

## PRODUCTIVITY

20 key actions of our Council Plan were completed between 2021 and 2023

The Council Plan 2021-2026 is built on three tiers consisting of our priorities, our objectives and the key projects and activity the council will undertake to achieve our objectives. The Plan is supported by a delivery plan to ensure we keep on track and creates a positive culture for continuous improvement. This plan was refreshed in October 2023 reflecting [the progress](#) that has been made since the adoption of the plan in 2021 and 10 additional actions were added.

Each service area has a set of performance indicators and clear service plans aligned to the Council Plan. This ensures that there is a golden thread that runs through the organisation so that all services are outcomes

focused and measured for productivity. Each year, our successes will be published as part of the annual review of the Council Plan.

The council has a strong framework of corporate governance and performance management with all policy committees receiving quarterly performance monitoring reports, and the Strategic Risk Register is considered at every meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee.

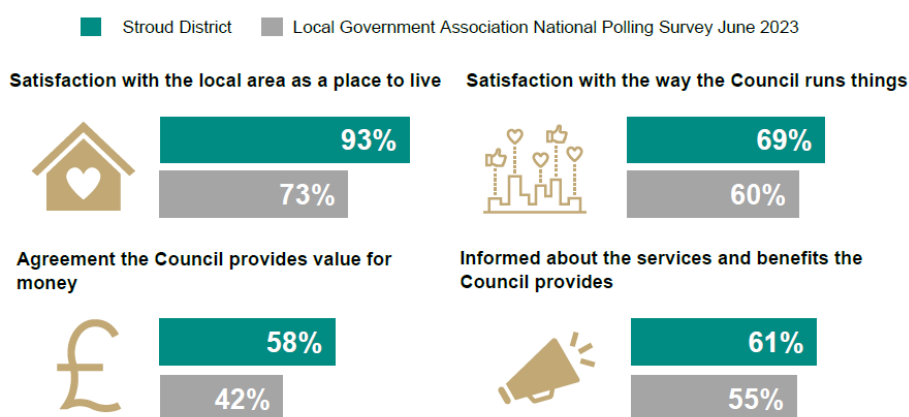
In 2022, the council established a Corporate Governance Group to provide strategic oversight of our governance activities, enhance the three lines of defence and ensure good governance by; developing and monitoring performance data, implementing and overseeing the council’s approach to project and programme management, monitoring compliance with audit recommendations, monitoring the contracts register and receiving reports of data breaches.

In early 2023 we invested in a new performance and risk management system, Ideagen, through which we are able to report on comprehensive and informative performance measures, with a focus on continuous improvement to inform our service delivery.

The council continues to build on and invest in partnership working across Gloucestershire in areas such as Legal, Building Control and Audit, and continues to support the district’s Local Strategic Partnership.

Importantly, the council measures itself against other local authorities to ensure continuous improvements. Benchmarking enables the council to recognise good practice across the sector.

The Council's annual budget survey of residents 2023 continues to show high levels of satisfaction with Council services.



## SPEND

The council has a proven track record of strong financial management and strategic financial planning, which has ensured its financial sustainability and resilience, particularly in the face of unprecedented reductions in Government funding.

Financially, the year 2023/24 has been a strong one for the council. General Fund and Housing Revenue Account services have both been delivered within agreed budgets. Increased income from business rates retention, the Business Rates Pool and high investment returns have also allowed for allocations to reserves at the end of the financial year. In February 2024, Councillors were also able to agree a balanced budget for 2024/25 whilst also increasing budget allocations to a number of priority services.

### General Fund

The 2023/24 unaudited Statement of Accounts showed there has been no change in the Council’s bottom-line General Fund balance which currently stands at £2.169m. The adequacy of this bottom-line position is reviewed each year as part of the budget-setting process, and considering the strong earmarked reserve position, this balance has remained stable for many years.

### Housing Revenue Account

The Council owns and maintains its own housing stock and manages 4,991 properties with a balance sheet value of £317m (2022/23 £311m). In 2023/24, the HRA had an underspend against budget of £1.853m.

We continue to deploy capital funds where possible to deliver council priorities, maximise efficiency and reduce revenue pressures; over the past year we have made major investments in the decarbonisation of our Leisure Centres and Museum in the Park, delivering Canal Phase 1b (Stonehouse to Saul Junction), Multi Service Contract vehicle purchases and retrofitting our existing council-owned housing to make them more efficient to reduce running costs and fuel poverty as well as building high quality, energy efficient homes.

We do not have any specifically employed Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Equity (EDI&E) champions although we do have volunteer EDI&E champions across the council. Three officers currently spend 10% of

their time in this area of work and we have an EDI&E Working Group that meets monthly to embed good practice and ensure we are delivering against our EDI&E objectives and Action Plan. These activities ensure compliance with the Equalities Act and as addressing inequalities is a fundamental role of local councils, it is not considered as 'wasteful' spend.

A Resources Group established in 2022 reviews the need to fill all of the councils' vacancies, assessing the need against outcomes of process re-engineering, budget, non-statutory functions and looks for opportunities to join up services and workloads across the organisation.

4.5% of the total staff budget is spent on agency and 0.2% of total staff budget is spent on consultants. Agency or consultancy is sometimes the more effective way to deliver or procure an outcome particularly for a small district council as we cannot employ specialist staff for every eventuality, and so it is more cost effective to buy in expertise through consultancy when we need it. Other times, it can come down to the necessity to keep services running where we haven't been able to recruit or retain staff when competing with private sector salaries. However, we always look to minimise agency and contractor spend where we can and plan to conduct a full review of our agency and contractor spend.

## BARRIERS

Following a consultation across the organisation, the following barriers that the Government can help to reduce or remove have been identified:

### Barriers and solutions

- **Across the Council:** Short term funding solutions create a fundamental challenge to investing in long-term productivity solutions. For example, it is difficult to commit to software solutions which have ongoing licensing costs when there is no certainty of funding beyond the next 10 months.
- It takes a significant amount of resource for a small district council to put together and submit bids for funding.
- Major challenges in attracting and retaining the necessary skilled workforce. There is a particular skills shortage in certain professional areas such as Planning and Environmental Health. Private sector pay outstrips local government in key areas, and this often outweighs the benefits offered by local government such as an attractive pension and greater job security.
- Internal Drainage Board levies are a significant financial pressure for local authorities. They are the sum the Council cannot control and they have an impact on our ability to invest in frontline services.
- **Housing Services:** The increased demand for housing services and the ability to provide housing solutions is heavily constrained by the lack of rented housing available in the social and private sector. This is exacerbated by Local Housing Allowance rates which, even taking into account the current uplift, are inadequate for the local housing market.
- The landscape of housing sector requirements is increasing rapidly without additional funding e.g. legislative and regulatory changes, revamped Ombudsman, additional focus on damp and mould, Building Safety Act etc.
- Skilled, experienced professionals are leaving the sector leading to difficulties with recruitment and retention.
- Rents being capped means that rents are not keeping pace with inflation and rising cost of materials.
- Housing Services often have to step into social care spaces due to their own staffing and budget pressures. This has a significant impact on our resources and Housing officers do not have the training, skills or experience to manage these matters.

### Solutions

- A medium-term funding solution which is not dependent on competitive bids or administratively complex grant programmes.
- Less burdensome administration of government-funded schemes such as the Rural England Prosperity Fund.
- A move away from competitive bidding processes such as LUF to a more allocative approach that trusts councils to use national funding wisely to benefit their area.
- Joined up training and recruitment programmes for key areas of council work.
- National-level investment in key areas of skills shortage.

### Solutions

- Reform of the planning system to prioritise the delivery of new affordable homes.
- Changes to social housing rents, ensuring rents cover the costs required to deliver the services that government/regulator expects.
- Increase Council shares of Right to Buy receipts and reduce the level of Right to Buy discount to enable us to replenish council housing stock.