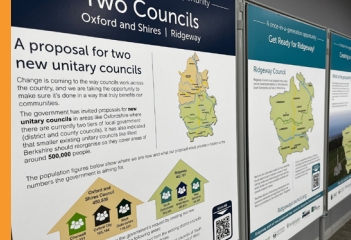


Transformation Review



WestBerkshire
COUNCIL

Foreword



Cllr Jeff Brooks
Leader of the Council



Cllr Vicky Poole
Portfolio Holder-Transformation

We are proud to be able to offer this update on our transformation programme to West Berkshire Council's Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee.

When we entered administration in May 2023, we gained control of a Council that was performing well and with which local residents indicated satisfaction with many local services. What we also inherited was a Council with huge potential to improve but on the brink of financial difficulty. For this reason, we set about developing an ambitious two-year transformation programme which we felt would deliver significant benefits to residents whilst making sure local services remained sustainable.

In the almost 2 years that have followed, through the development of that programme officers and members have shown creativity, resilience and tenacity in the pursuit of delivering on our objectives.

We are very pleased with the progress made on many of the projects, however two stand out in particular. One of these is the **Walnut Close** temporary accommodation project, which has made not just a financial impact but a life-changing impact on the lives of local families experiencing homelessness. This impact is so significant that we have been able to realise our aspiration to have no local children in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The other of these is the **Employee Value Proposition** project, which has revitalised the way in which we recruit and retain our employees. The numbers contained within this report speak for themselves, but it is clear from the brilliant work done through this project that West Berkshire Council has become- as we wished it to- be an employer of choice locally.

We are now looking forward to the two years ahead, during which we will have to further strengthen our resolve and heighten our ambition to deliver more for our community here in West Berkshire. We welcome the Committee's input as we begin this journey.

Executive summary

West Berkshire Council's transformation programme has already made a big impact. This has included streamlining services, embracing digital tools, and redesigning how we work, all to make things better for our residents and more efficient for the Council. One standout example is Walnut Close, where support for families facing homelessness has been improved. The team has also extensively reviewed administrative functions to cut down on duplication and refreshed how the Council attracts and recruits talent, making it easier for people to join and thrive in the organisation.

Thanks to the Transformation team's reputation for getting things done quickly and effectively, they have been asked to take on even more projects. These extra initiatives have helped improve service quality and made our operations more financially sustainable. For instance, the team is contributing to the upgrade of our finance system and reorganised how the Council stores archived materials. These are small changes with big benefits.

To keep up with the pace and scale of change, the Council has restructured the Transformation department. There is now a new Service Director leading the combined Transformation, Customer and ICT department. This change follows advice from the Local Government Association and a decision by our members to bring all project delivery under one roof. The new department includes Communications, Customer Services, Digital Services, ICT, the Programme Management Office, and the Transformation team. Since stepping into the role in May 2025, the new Service Director has been busy shaping the team and recruiting key leaders. The new structure is set to go live on 1st October 2025.

With most of the original projects either wrapped up, nearly finished, or moving into day-to-day operations, we're now gearing up to create a fresh transformation plan. This next phase will focus on future priorities and make sure everything done aligns with the Council's wider strategy.

This is being done at a time when local government is under pressure, both financially and structurally. The Government's reorganisation plans, which has led to the development the Ridgeway proposal, are reshaping the context in which we deliver our services. But there's also opportunity: new technologies like AI could help us rethink how we deliver services and make them even better.

Context and resourcing

In March 2023, West Berkshire Council decided to recruit a new Service Director for Transformation for a two-year period in order to bring forward an additional programme of transformational projects in response to its financial position. After they were recruited in May 2023, the new Service Director worked with the new administration to develop a programme of six projects, selected on the basis of their impact, either financial or in terms of customer experience.

The six projects were as follows:

- **Accommodation Review**- a comprehensive review of the Council's property estate with a view to consolidating its footprint and improving customer experience
- **Business Support Review**- reviewing generic functions across the Council and centralising them to realise efficiencies
- **Care homes review**- outsourcing of the Council's in-house care homes
- **Employee Value Proposition**- the development of a new recruitment website and an Employee Value Proposition to attract talent and address the Council's recruitment issues and spend on agency staffing
- **Home school transport review**- the development and implementation of a plan to address the overspending position in home school transport
- **Place service improvement plan**- a review of the Council's planning service to improve customer experience

For the first six months of the programme, the Service Director- Transformation was the only member of the team and was asked to deploy resource from across the organisation to facilitate delivery of these projects, for which she would act as project sponsor. Subsequently, new roles were put into the team to oversee the Business Support Review (December 2023), and the Accommodation Review (July 2024) and transformation funding has been made available for and an additional project manager (September 2024) and two business analysts (October 2024).

Following the departure of the Chief Executive in November 2024, a temporary new structure was put in place, and a number of additional teams were placed into the Transformation department including Communications, Customer Services, Digital, ICT, Performance and the Programme Office.

This temporary arrangement was subsequently dissolved in April 2025, when a restructure formally created the Transformation, Customer and ICT department, with its own Service Director, who was recruited in May 2025.

From October 2025, project management resource from across the organisation will be consolidated into a central Programme Management Office (PMO). This is likely to have a number of benefits, including promoting a more consistent approach to project delivery as well as a more effective prioritisation process. At this point, the monitoring and implementation of all transformational activity will come under one department, and therefore it is anticipated that it will be possible to develop a more comprehensive and overarching transformation programme making best use of available resource. This in turn will give the transformation programme more scope to have a meaningful and wider impact on the Council's financial position.

In the pages that follow, we will discuss the projects delivered, or being delivered, by the programme so far.

Business Support Review - in delivery



Over the past two years, the Transformation Unit has led Phase 1 of the Business Support Review, undertaking thorough analysis of functions across all Directorates. This has included thorough stakeholder engagement through workshops with staff, interviews and, most importantly, 1:1 shadowing of key business support functions. These activities enabled the team to build a detailed understanding of operational needs and challenges across the wider Council and develop a new structure for business support which is future-focused and will deliver a more efficient and resilient services. The proposals presented expect to achieve immediate annual savings of £27,000-£30,000, with more savings being realised through natural wastage following implementation.



Despite significant challenges, the team has successfully collaborated with staff and leadership, using their skills to manage change, and maintain momentum. In addition to the Business Support Review, the Transformation Unit continues to support a diverse portfolio of projects including their contribution to the emergency community equipment response, the digitisation of Council document archives, and the development of storage solutions for West Berkshire Museum exhibits, an audit of off-site storage facilities, contributions to creating opportunities for the commercialisation of Shaw House and the Agresso enhancement and migration project. These initiatives will contribute to long-term service sustainability and operational & cost efficiency.



“The Transformation Unit continues to support a diverse portfolio of projects”

Accommodation Review



The Walnut Close Children's Family Time project, delivered between February and June 2024 with a budget of £14,044 (underspent by £956), successfully consolidated family time services into a single, purpose-designed space at Walnut Tree House. This created a more welcoming and appropriate environment for families, resulting in improved outcomes and experiences. The project achieved cost avoidance in staff overtime, mileage, parking, and room hire, and reduced carbon impact through more efficient travel and use of council accommodation. Delivered within budget, the project also benefited from community contributions, such as furniture donations and time given for volunteering. The space has attracted interest from other teams, increasing its long-term value and enabling wider use by services such as family conferencing and fostering. Children's Services are estimated to have avoided costs of £120k-£140k, with more efficient use of staff time and facilities.



The Market Street Office (MSO) Improvements project ran from June 2024 to May 2025 with a budget of £10,543 and delivered a series of enhancements to the MSO. These included the installation of 1-2-1 meeting pods, relocation of Education officers to the second floor, creation of a dedicated Emergency Operations Centre, and a pilot of a quiet working environment. The project also relocated Turnham's Green Child Protection Meeting capacity to MSO, removed and repurposed tall storage units, and completed a storage amnesty across all floors. These changes improved operational effectiveness and staff experience, while achieving significant cost avoidance through furniture reuse and community repurposing. All planned deliverables were met, with additional scope delivered through the storage amnesty. The project contributed to wider estate rationalisation and saved approximately £7,000 through reuse initiatives.



The Walnut Close Temporary Supported Accommodation project, delivered from August 2024 to February 2025 with a budget of £86,000 (overspent by £26,000 due to operational and compliance costs), converted a former care home into 27 residential units. This transformation enabled the relocation of the ASC locality team to Laburnum and supported vulnerable families and children with safe, supportive housing. A soft opening was held in February 2025, with full occupancy achieved by mid-March. The project is forecasted to avoid over £524,000 in annual costs and generate £34,000 in rental income surplus.

It significantly reduced the number of families placed in B&Bs and commercial hotels, improving outcomes and reducing carbon impact. The asset, previously mothballed, is now actively delivering essential services.



The Laburnum ASC Localities Team Relocation project, completed between July and November 2024 with a budget of £12,827.54 (overspent by £2,827.54), converted a former community space into suitable accommodation for the ASC Central Localities Team. This relocation freed up space at Walnut Close for other transformation projects and included the creation of additional garden storage for another WBC team. The project realised cost avoidance at Walnut Close, reduced staff travel and carbon impact, and improved service delivery through a community-based location. Despite a slight delay due to planning committee scheduling and property maintenance needs, the accommodation was delivered as planned with added value. Efficiency savings were achieved through better use of council facilities and reduced environmental impact.

The team is currently supporting the Turnhams Green Disposal and Staff Relocation project, which supports the Council's objective of achieving financial savings through estate rationalisation. With a budget of £50,000, the asset was placed on the open market, with a view to relocating staff following a sale. Initially valued at £1.5 million in 2024, the asset's price was reduced to £850,000 in February 2025 to reflect market conditions. It remains on the market for disposal.

The Museum Storage Relocation from Bone Lane project, budgeted at £23,000, addresses the need for appropriate museum exhibit storage and aims to reduce pressure on the revenue budget. The project involves cataloguing and relocating items from Building 150 and Bone Lane to the museum once damp remediation works are complete. Progress includes item cataloguing and barcode preparation, with the Bone Lane lease extended by six months (until August 2026) due to delays in the damp project. Expected benefits include annual revenue savings of £48,000. However, the damp project's delays and expanded scope pose significant constraints. The next steps focus on completing the damp works to enable the relocation.



The Chestnut Walk Temporary Supported Accommodation project seeks to repurpose a long-vacant care home into temporary housing for families, singles, and couples experiencing homelessness. This initiative supports the Council's plan to eliminate reliance on B&Bs by offering a cost-effective and suitable alternative for those owed a Section 188 housing duty. The building, which has been empty for around ten years and suffered fire damage and vandalism, has recently undergone asbestos abatement. A feasibility study is underway to determine the scope and cost of necessary works. The project's success depends on securing capital investment and accessing Section 106 funding. Upcoming actions include developing a business case and financial model for Member approval and preparing a procurement strategy to appoint a Contract Design and Management (CDM) contractor.

The Market Street Meeting Facility Optimisation-Shaw House Exit project addresses the limitations Shaw House faces in maximising commercial revenue due to constraints imposed by Timelord2. Insights from Market Street Resource Finder data and Shaw House bookings suggest that Market Street can absorb Shaw House's meeting room demand with minor adjustments. Current activities include identifying necessary changes, estimating budget requirements for furniture and reconfiguration, and drafting a project brief and communications plan. The project faces constraints around budget availability and potential resistance from officers and Members. Next steps include seeking approval from the Resource Prioritisation Group and Corporate Board.

The Resource Centres project explores opportunities to co-locate services within existing Resource Centre assets to create an integrated service model. This initiative aims to drive internal efficiencies, improve financial resilience, and enhance service delivery. Engagement has taken place across Transformation, Adult Social Care, Children's Services, and Asset & Property teams. Options under consideration include co-locating ASC Day Care and the Children's Family Hub (0–18 years) with Transport Services at Phoenix Resource Centre by 2028, and similar co-location at Greenfield Resource Centre with additional desk space for officers from Turnhams Green. In Hungerford, part-lease opportunities are being explored to maximise asset usage. The next step is to develop business cases for Member approval

As a consolidated team will bring with it more scope to maximise resource, it is likely that this programme will be scaled up in future so that the newly compiled asset register can be used to guide a strategic pipeline of accommodation projects which will enable the Council to make best use of its buildings and provide a higher quality service. This links closely with work being done within the Community Services department, including the Let's Talk initiative

“Which will enable the Council to make best use of its buildings and provide a higher quality service.”

Place service improvement plan

- On hold

The Place Service improvement plan was paused pending permanent recruitment into the Service Director- Development and Housing role. Now that a post holder is in place, it is likely the improvement plan for this service will be undertaken by this new Service Director. In the meantime, progress has been made towards improving user experience across planning services, which has included attracting Central Government investment for planning digitisation, and has seen a significant reduction in the planning application backlog as well as improvements to decision-making times.



Review of care homes- In delivery



This review was originally developed as members recognised that most local authorities did not directly operate their own care homes and that the existing care homes operated by West Berkshire Council were regularly incurring a loss. It was anticipated that seeking an alternative operator for these three homes had the potential to help the Council to realise a saving in the region of £2,000,000 as well as improve the operations of the homes in the interest of residents.



“Exploring ways to improve operational efficiency across all three care homes to enhance their financial viability.”

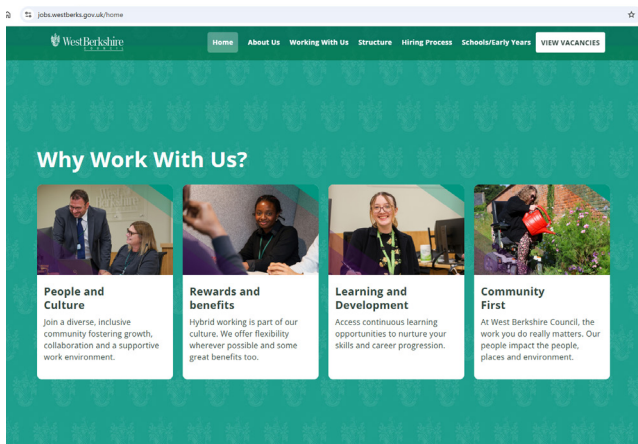
An exercise to identify an alternative provider was run in August 2024, and a successful bidder came forward. Progress was made to initiate the transfer, however this successful provider pulled out in January 2025, just a few days before the contract was due to be signed. As an alternative, a project to sell the homes as a going concern was initiated. Members decided to pursue an open market sale of both care homes as going concerns. The council is now proceeding with the sale of two of its homes and the redevelopment of one, while also exploring ways to improve operational efficiency across all three care homes to enhance their financial viability.



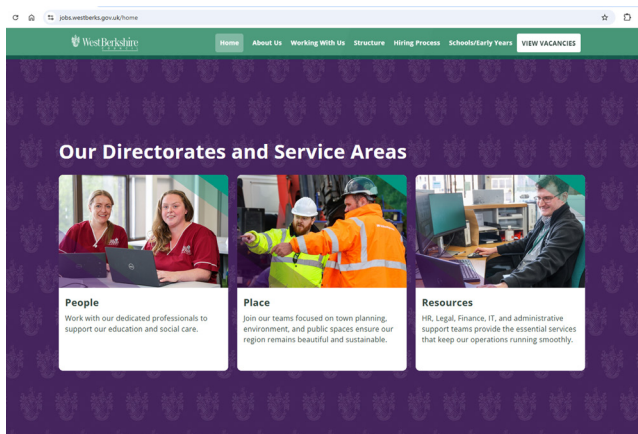
Expected benefits include successful bids in the open market and forecasted Adult Social Care savings of approximately £1.3 million. Current workstreams include appointing agents to market both homes and identifying further efficiency opportunities.



Recruitment and retention review- Completed



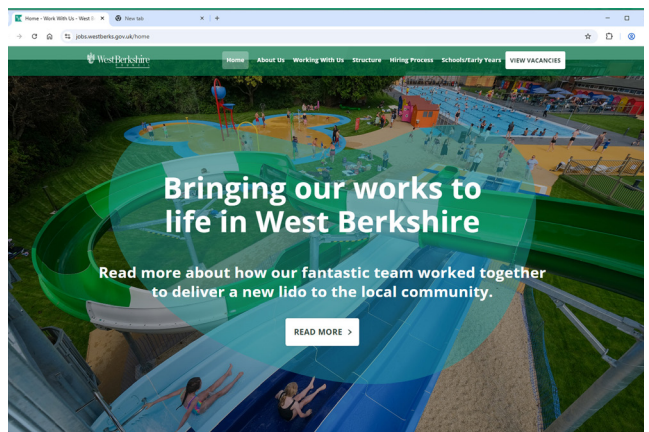
The principle of developing a new Employee Value Proposition and recruitment website was the brainchild of the Leader of the Council as he has a professional background in HR. He felt strongly that working in local government and making an impact on one's local community was a positive selling point and that there were opportunities to promote the benefits of working in a local authority. The Council's previous recruitment website, although rich in content, was not visually appealing and did not successfully tell the story of working for the organisation.



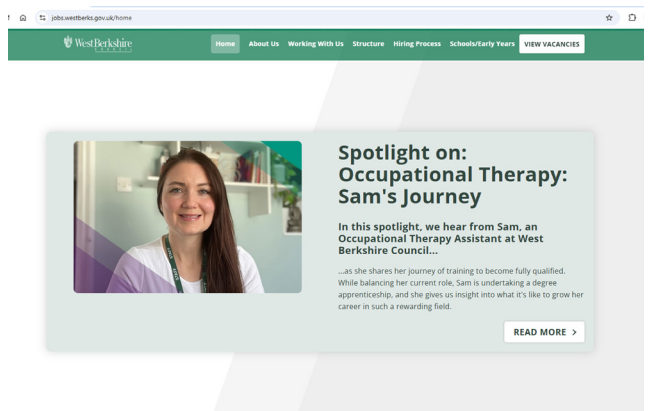
The new process led to an increase in traffic to the careers site of 90% from 14,000 users up to 26,000 users visiting the site in the 7 months to May 2025 from its launch vs the 7 months prior. The visibility of the site has improved; the number of users landing on our careers site from online search engines has increased by 280% in this time.

The Council's recruitment presence on social media has also increased, which has driven traffic through to the site, with 1,284 users landing on the site from social media in the 7 months to May 2025 vs 25 users in the 7 months before launch. The simplified application process has reduced the rate of abandoned applications from an average of 63% to 23%. This has all contributed to a 29% increase in new starters in the 7 months post-launch, compared with the same period the previous year.

Not only this, but the project has helped to facilitate significant savings and cost avoidance within the Council's spend on agency staff, which is of tangible financial benefit.



“The new process led to an increase in traffic to the careers site of 90% from 14,000 users up to 26,000 users visiting the site”



Review of home to school transport-

In delivery



The home to school transport (HTST) savings project was established with a view to exploring and realising some of the potential savings opportunities and recommendations made earlier that year by consultants, including establishing a new HTST policy. The consultant report, which was compiled in early 2023, had identified a number of areas of focus with a view to achieving a 15% saving on, the then, £3m annual budget (i.e. ~£450k/annum), acknowledging at that time there was also a £1m pressure on the existing budget. Not all of the recommendations were forecast to directly deliver savings, but some would be necessary to underpin other activities. The consultant did not identify what the process, nor the costings, would be in order to deliver all the recommendations, so it was understood that not all the options may prove practical to progress.

The project has delivered substantial operational and financial improvements. A dedicated Transport Review Officer was appointed to drive initiatives, including the development of a new HTST policy for statutory-aged pupils that prioritises independence and sustainability. Route optimisation efforts led to 221 contractual changes in FY2024/25, resulting in net annual savings of over £500,000. Strategic use of Q-Routes software informed contract tendering and system retendering, while ongoing collaboration between Education and Transport teams has strengthened decision-making around appeals and contract reviews. Independent Travel Training has been piloted with support from Brookfields School and Reading Buses, and future plans include expanding this to mainstream pupils

with GWR. Additionally, the use of high needs funding for non-statutory transport and the development of a service-level agreement with i College have improved cost-effectiveness and service coordination.

Further efficiencies have been achieved through reviews of passenger assistant use, Personal Transport Budgets, and the implementation of central boarding points for SEN routes, reducing journey times and operational duplication. Market development efforts, including an Operator's Forum, have enhanced supplier engagement and competitiveness. While some initiatives, such as merging coach operations to The Downs School, were not implemented, they provided valuable insights for future planning. Farepayer scheme charges were increased, aligning more closely with actual transport costs and generating additional income. Although FY2025/26 savings are expected to be lower due to retendering at higher market rates, the project continues to identify and implement cost-effective solutions, including potential in-house operations through the Resource Centre project.



In summary, the two primary aims of the project (implementing a new policy and delivering savings of £450k+/annum) were achieved in FY2024/25 and a number of other initiatives will formally come into place at the start of the academic year 2025/26. It is important to acknowledge, however, that there are some outstanding high-level and longer-term initiatives which will impact on future transport costs, such as those focusing on SEND sufficiency, iCollege reform and school rationalisation that are subject to wider strategic Education activities and priorities and resourcing within the People Directorate.

Other projects



The following additional projects have been supported by the team during this two-year period.

The Tudor Garden at Shaw House project, funded by a £114,226 UKSPF grant, was completed between August 2024 and March 2025. It involved the creation and public opening of a historically inspired garden, with planting aligned to Tudor-era horticulture to enhance the site's heritage value. Volunteer engagement was strong, with two planting days and ongoing maintenance support. The garden has received early positive feedback and is already being used as a wedding photo location. It strengthens the local cultural offer and promotes community wellbeing through volunteer involvement. While no direct efficiency savings were realised, the garden is expected to boost footfall and increase café and shop income, with metrics to be confirmed at the end of FY 2025/26. The project also updated the site's audio guide to include the new garden.



In delivery

The Enhancement and Migration of Agresso to Unit4 SaaS project, with a budget of £250,000, aims to modernise the Council's finance and IT systems. Key objectives include upgrading to a full HeyCentric system, updating Agresso to version V7u16, rationalising the chart of accounts, transitioning Accounts Receivable (AR) to a web-based platform, and decommissioning hosting with QTC. Progress to date includes completion of the HeyCentric upgrade, 80% of enhancement workshops and requirement gathering, and the build for web-based AR. A CIPFA report on the chart of accounts is also underway. The project promises improved functionality, compliance, and operational efficiency. The next phase involves iterative build and testing, alongside ongoing communication with Finance staff and stakeholders.



The Disaster Recovery Relocation from Turnhams Green project, budgeted at £15,000, involves moving the Council's disaster recovery equipment to Greenfield Resource Centre due to the planned disposal of Turnham's Green. Air conditioning units have already been installed at the new site. The relocation ensures continued business continuity and aligns with modern standards, facilitating a smoother transition during asset disposal. Upcoming actions include obtaining a quote from CitiFiber for telegraph pole connectivity and installing anti-vandalism cages on AC condensers.



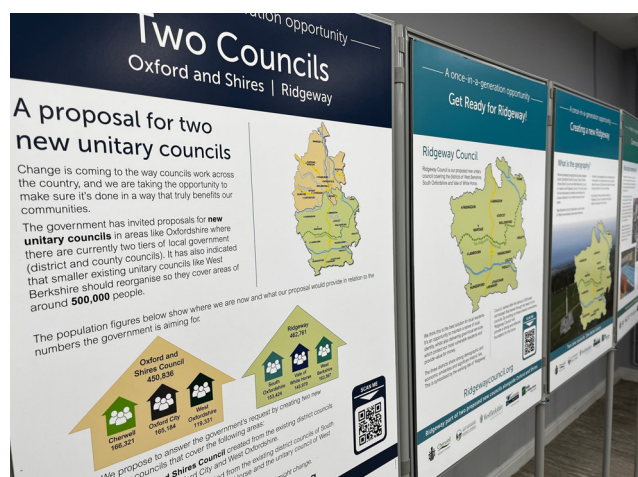
The team is in the process of supporting the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) project, which aims to identify lower-income families and individuals within West Berkshire and provide targeted information and campaigns to help improve their financial stability and resilience. Local authorities across the UK have used the LIFT platform to proactively identify financially vulnerable households, resulting in over £200 million in support for 50,000 people, increased benefit take-up, reduced arrears, and improved targeting of cost-of-living interventions, ultimately enhancing financial resilience and reducing crisis support costs.



The Service Director for Transformation, Customer and ICT is currently acting as the Service Director lead for West Berkshire Council across two major strategic workstreams: the Ridgeway unitary proposal and the Thames Valley Mayoral Combined Authority proposal. These initiatives are directly aligned with the Government's Devolution White Paper, which sets out a framework for empowering local areas through greater autonomy and integrated governance. By coordinating elements the Council's business case production for these proposals, the Transformation, Customer & ICT department is working to ensure that West Berkshire is well-positioned to influence and respond to emerging opportunities in regional reorganisation and devolution.



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Conclusion

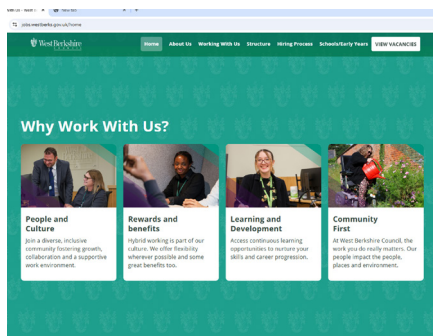
The transformation programme has delivered substantial financial and operational efficiencies across multiple service areas. Its projects have delivered savings, which are outlined in the table on the next page, while improving service resilience and user experience. These outcomes demonstrate the programme's effectiveness in identifying and implementing cost-saving measures without compromising service quality.

Strategic asset optimisation and service redesign have enhanced the Council's ability to deliver community-focused outcomes. Accommodation projects, including Walnut Close Temporary Supported Accommodation and Market Street Improvements, have repurposed under-utilised assets to support vulnerable residents, improve staff working environments, and reduce reliance on costly external provisions. These projects have also contributed to environmental goals through reduced travel and better use of council-owned facilities

The Transformation, Customer & ICT department team has proven its capacity to lead complex, cross-departmental initiatives, which will be further enhanced with its new structure and consolidated project management capacity in place.

This will enable it to play a key role in shaping the council's response to financial pressures, digital opportunities, and local government reorganisation.

As the majority of projects within the programme are nearing an end, have already been completed, or are likely to progress to business as usual, the Service Director for Transformation, Customer and ICT will now work with members to develop what will become phase two of the transformation programme. The Portfolio Holder for Transformation will be leading a cross-party policy development group which will ensure that this new programme is reflective of the needs of the community and can be put in place at pace. It is likely that this new programme will comprise further projects that data and financial information suggest have the potential to make a meaningful difference to the Council's financial position.



Appendix A

Summary of Corporate Transformation Programme Savings

	Savings		Cost Avoidance		
	Achieved	In Delivery	Achieved	In Delivery	Total
Business Support Review		30,000			30,000
Strategic Asset & Locality Service Delivery Model					
Walnut Close Children's Family Time			130,000		130,000
Market Street Office Improvements					0
Walnut Close Temporary Supported Accommodation			524,000		524,000
Laburnum ASC Locality Team Relocation					0
Turnhams Green Disposal and Staff Relocation project				86,290	86,290
Museum Storage Relocation from Bone Lane				47,150	47,150
Chestnut Walk Temporary Supported Accommodation					0
Market Street Meeting Facility Optimisation- Shaw House Exit					0
Resource Centres				469,000	469,000
Place Service Improvement Plan					0
Employee Value Proposition					• See note below
Review of Care Home Provision		1,229,660			1,229,660
Review of Home-to-School Transport			500,000		500,000
	0	1,259,660	1,154,000	602,440	3,016,100

- The Employee Value Proposition has contributed to a reduction in agency spend of £4.6m/ 36% revenue, which has been achieved in 2024/25 (compared to 2022/23)



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