

Investment Strategy Report 2025/26

West Oxfordshire District Council

Introduction

The Council invests its money for three broad purposes:

- to generate additional revenue from surplus cash because of timing differences in its day-to-day activities. These are referred to as treasury management investments and are typically short to medium term cash funds with high liquidity but can be invested with the expectation of a longer term if our cashflow forecasting shows no medium-term requirement for the cash.
- to support local public services by lending to other organisations or purchasing assets which generate no return but are used solely for the delivery of services (service investments), and
- to earn investment income (known as commercial investments) where, alongside the achievement of Council priorities, the objective is also to earn a return – although that may not be the primary purpose.

This Investment Strategy meets the requirements of the statutory guidance on Investments for Local Government which came into effect on 1 April 2018.

We are the custodians of third-party monies such as external grants and developer contributions through S106. We also have a portfolio of commercial investments which further Council priorities while providing crucial support to our revenue budget and therefore the delivery of our services.

The proposed changes to Local Government Funding from 2026/27 will put significant pressure on the Council's budget, with the progression of the funding gap evidenced in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Our ability to generate investment income is therefore a key factor in our financial stability.

All investments must combine the delivery of the Council's priorities with revenue returns over and above the cost of borrowing that will provide additional funding to the Council to deliver services not only in the immediate year but over the life of the MTFS. In order to minimise risk, investments will only be made where there are proportional underlying assets that can be used as security against the loan.

While everything the Council does relates to serving the residents of the district by furthering the Council's stated priorities, the investment strategy is also designed to generate new revenue streams for the Council.

The Council has a good track record of investments, having purchased a portfolio of commercial property in the past from capital receipts and cash balances that provides a healthy net revenue stream that is crucial to supporting our budget today.

The Council takes a commercial view of all potential projects to ensure that revenue is generated where possible. This does not mean that we are seeking to charge for services where we would not have otherwise, but rather that opportunities to generate income are not ignored and where income is able to be generated in a situation, the Council seeks to retain an appropriate proportion of it.

However there has been a move in recent years by HM Treasury's Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) lending facility to severely restrict what Councils are allowed to invest in. This is in response to a very small number of Councils investing large sums and destabilising their finances as a result. Since the PWLB is a vital source of relatively low-cost loans for the Council, it would be unwise to contravene its requirements unless we could be absolutely sure that we did not need to call on it. The requirements are so stringent however that the very act of "investing primarily for yield" is enough to render the Council ineligible to access their funds, even if the investment in question was not made using their funding.

It is permissible to purchase property for the purpose of regeneration or housing, and property purchased should be within the boundaries of the Council's district, but any asset bought primarily for yield will preclude the authority from accessing PWLB funds.

Whilst the previous prudential code stated that authorities must not "borrow more than or in advance of need" current restrictions are much more prescriptive. There is some allowance for financing capital expenditure primarily related to the delivery of the authority's functions, temporary cashflow management or the refinance of current borrowing (including internal borrowing). This would allow us to borrow, for example, to replace the waste fleet – which helps with the timing of cashflow. There is no return on these vehicles and they do not repay the money spent on them. They are a cost that is paid for annually from our revenue budget as part of our delivery of services. The more we spend on the vehicles, the higher the cost of service delivery.

The PWLB supports investment in Housing which includes spending on delivering new homes, improving existing homes and purchasing built homes to deliver housing services. The Council transferred its housing stock to an affordable housing provider decades ago, so the skill sets required to build and manage housing is no longer available within the Council. For this reason, any projects we are considering need to be in conjunction with an experienced partner to reduce the risk inherent in the construction process. The Council currently employs a Strategic Housing Development Manager to provide appropriate resource and knowledge to oversee the key Council priority of delivering more affordable housing in the district.

It is important to note that all projects are required to serve Council priorities, meet the criteria set out above and also be cash generating, providing returns that equal or better the rate agreed in the Council's investment strategy.

The Prudential Code does not require us to sell existing assets to fund new investments but does require us to consider that as an option when pursuing new opportunities. Capital receipts from asset sales can only be used for capital expenditure.

It also requires the S151 officer to confirm that the Council has no intention, either now, or in the next three years, to invest primarily for financial return.

In accordance with this, we can confirm that West Oxfordshire District Council has complied with paragraphs 51 to 53 of the Prudential Code in relation to investments for commercial purposes, in particular the requirement that an authority must not borrow to invest for the primary purpose of financial return and that our capital programme includes no such plans.

The Council is currently reviewing the viability of small scale affordable housing developments, decarbonisation projects, the phased replacement of the waste vehicle fleet and the purchase of temporary emergency accommodation.

Treasury Management Investments

In general, the Council receives the bulk of its funding (for example, from taxes and grants) before it pays for its expenditure (for example, through payroll and invoices). As a Council Tax 'billing authority' it collects local taxes on behalf of other local authorities and the Police and holds reserves for future expenditure. Any cash surplus is invested in accordance with guidance from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

Events in the financial markets in the last three years have meant that many of our pooled funds lost a material amount of capital value while producing a significantly higher revenue return. The capital value has recovered somewhat over the last year with current advice from our treasury advisors being a complete recovery over the next 18 months to 2 years as interest rates fall.

The expectation is that for the short to medium term, our treasury investments will remain relatively static in terms of where they are invested. When the capital values have recovered, the use of pooled funds rather than external borrowing for capital expenditure will be carefully weighed against the prevailing economic conditions at the time.

These investments contribute to the objectives of the Council by providing income to fund operational activity in support of the Council's priorities.

Details of the Council's policies and its 2025/26 plans for treasury management are covered in the Treasury Management Strategy in Annex M.

Service Investments: Loans

The Council lends money to support local public services and stimulate local economic growth. These include loans to organisations within the district which support the priorities of the Council.

The main risk when making service loans is that the borrower will be unable to repay the principal loaned and/or the interest due. To limit this risk, and ensure that total exposure to service loans remains proportionate to the size of the Council, upper limits on the outstanding loans to each category of borrower have been set as follows:

Loans for service purposes £m

Category of Borrower	Actual at 31st March 2024			Forecast at 31st March 2025	
	Balance Owing	Loss Allowance	Figure in Accounts	Balance Owing	Approved Limit
	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
Local Businesses	2.45	0.00	2.45	2.31	2.31
Town/Parish Councils	0.107	0.00	0.107	0.095	0.10
Housing Associations	7.57	0.00	7.57	7.48	7.48
Local Residents (Equity Loans)	0.23	0.00	0.23	0.23	0.23
Total	10.355	0.00	10.355	10.12	10.12

Accounting standards require the Council to set aside a loss allowance for loans, reflecting the likelihood of non-payment. The loans that the Council has made are limited to specific service areas where the risk of non-payment is minimal. As a result, no allowance for loss has been included against the loan balances. Should any indication be given that there is a risk of default then the risk will be assessed and a provision established at that time. Should a loan default, the Council will make every reasonable effort to collect the full sum lent and recover any overdue repayments.

The Council assesses the risk of loss before entering into service loans by undertaking credit checks and ensuring that appropriate legal documentation is in place to secure the Council's money.

Service Investments: Shares

The Council has a £1 shareholding in Ubico Ltd. Ubico Ltd is wholly owned by eight local authorities and operates as a not-for-profit enterprise. Ubico Ltd is an environmental services company which provides household and commercial refuse collection, recycling, street cleansing, grounds maintenance and fleet maintenance services to the Council.

One of the risks of investing in shares is that they potentially could fall in value meaning that the initial outlay may not be recovered. This is not relevant with the share held in Ubico for the reasons discussed below. The Council has no other shareholdings. The Council also owns Publica along with Cotswold District Council, Forest of Dean District Council and Cheltenham Borough Council but it is limited by guarantee and has no share capital. The same potential for upside or loss exists as with Ubico.

Shares held for service purposes

Category of Company	Amount Invested	Gains or losses	Value in Accounts	Approved Limit
Local Authority owned company	£1	£0	£1	£1

The Council has not invested in Ubico to generate a financial return. It has invested purely to support service provision. Ubico is a cost sharing company and any surplus generated within Ubico Ltd is returned to the partner Councils (shareholders) but any deficit would also be met by the Councils. This means that the Council's investment in Ubico carries with it an obligation to underwrite the costs of the service and that, while a budget is agreed each financial year, the Council must cover in cash any overspend to that budget which relates to the services delivered in West Oxfordshire. This is the material risk in the Ubico investment, not the £1 shareholding. This risk is mitigated through regular communication with Ubico and complete transparency. The Council is also working with Ubico on a service transformation programme to find new efficiencies and more cost effective ways of working.

The shareholding in Ubico does not appreciate in value due to the cost sharing nature of the company, it merely gives a shareholder's stake in the control of the company. The Council has no intention to sell its investment in the foreseeable future and the principal of teckal precludes ownership by third parties.

Shares are the only investment type that the Council has identified that meets the definition of a non-specified investment in the government guidance. The limits above on share investments are therefore also the Council's upper limits on non-specified investments. The Council has not adopted any procedures for determining further categories of non-specified investment since none are likely to meet the definition.

Commercial Investments In Property

Investment Property is defined in the CIPFA code of practice on Local Authority Accounting as property (land or building, or both) held solely to earn rentals, for capital appreciation, or both. The Council holds a number of assets which it classifies as Investment Properties.

The Council has historically invested in Investment Property both within West Oxfordshire and outside of the district, funded through capital receipts, with the intention of generating ongoing income to support the revenue budget.

Investment Property performance will be reported to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.

With the PWLB's restrictions on allowable investments, the existing property portfolio is extremely valuable to the Council. If any of the portfolio was to be sold, there would be an immediate cash gain in the form of capital receipts but the Council would not be able to use that to support the revenue budget and would find it difficult to find another replacement

investment that would deliver ongoing revenue budget support in the way that the existing property portfolio does.

Properties held for investment purposes in £m

Type of Property	Inside District £m	Outside District £m	Inside County £m	Outside County £m
Commercial Investment Property	16.43	29.26	41.92	3.76
Industrial Estates	7.56	0.00	7.56	0.00
Subtotal	23.99	29.26	49.48	3.76
Total Held	53.24		53.24	

The table above shows the value of the properties held by the Council at 31st March 2024. The valuations as at 31st March 2025 will be assessed by our ongoing valuation process and by external audit. The table shows the geographical split of properties inside the district and outside it and which of those properties are located inside the county. It should be noted that while just over half of the portfolio is outside of West Oxfordshire, most properties are within Oxfordshire itself.

In accordance with government guidance, the Council considers a property investment to be secure if its accounting valuation is at or higher than its purchase cost including taxes and transaction costs.

A fair value assessment of the Council's investment property portfolio is made each year as part of the final accounts process. Investment Property is valued at market value.

The fair value of the Council's investment property portfolio rose in 2023/24 due mostly to our industrial units at Talisman Business Park. The demand for larger office spaces since the pandemic has declined with the Council's office building at Between Towns Road now vacant and unlikely to be let as a single building. Options to sell the building for redevelopment are being explored, with any capital receipts being used to deliver the capital programme thereby reducing the amount of any future external borrowing.

No valuation has yet been undertaken for March 2025 when further updates will be available. The Council's Investment Property is held primarily to generate a stable income stream to support the revenue budget. Should a property be sold, any 'loss' will be recognised at that point.

To maximise returns, the Council aims to generate a revenue return from Investment Property assets which is greater than the return able to be generated by its Treasury Management activity. It is understood that the fair value of property will fluctuate. The Council aims wherever possible to secure its ongoing revenue streams by letting to tenants on long leases of 10 to 15 years. The return available from Treasury investments is also subject to change as interest rates rise and fall.

Compared with other investment types, property is difficult to sell and convert to cash at short notice and can take a considerable period to sell in certain market conditions. To ensure that the Council has cash funds that can be accessed when they are needed, the Treasury Management Strategy includes the provision of liquid investments should the Council need cash at short notice. The Council currently has a Treasury Management Investment portfolio with good short-term access to liquidity so no circumstances are foreseen where the Council would be required to sell Investment Property to raise money at short notice.

Loan commitments and financial guarantees

Although not strictly counted as investments, since no money has exchanged hands, loan commitments and financial guarantees carry similar risks to the Council and are included here for completeness.

The Council is a shareholder of Ubico Ltd (one eighth) and is a joint partner in Publica Group (Support) Limited (one quarter owner). In both cases, should the company overspend, the Council would be liable for its share of the additional costs. In both companies, transparency of reporting to the Council mitigates the risk that additional sums will be required without adequate notice.

The Council has made the following commitment in terms of cash flow cover to both Publica and Ubico and the expectation is that these will continue for 2025/26.

- Publica Group - £500k up to one year duration
- Ubico - £500k up to one year duration

The Council needs investment generated income to fund its revenue budget. The table below shows the extent to which the expenditure planned to meet the service delivery objectives of the Council is dependent on achieving the expected income from investments over the lifecycle of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). If it cannot generate sufficient income to fund its budget, the Council will be required to draw additional balances from reserves or generate savings elsewhere within the budget to continue to provide its services.

The table below includes the hoped for return generated by the investment strategy outlined above and in the MTFS, albeit that this is a reduced and hopefully more attainable level than that projected previously.

Proportionality of investments

	2024/25 Forecast	2025/26 Budget	2026/27 Budget	2027/28 Budget	2028/29 Budget	2029/30 Budget
Gross Service Expenditure*	32.69	33.22	34.06	34.74	35.43	36.14
Treasury Investment Income	1.35	1.16	1.13	1.11	1.09	1.07
Loans Income	0.19	0.19	0.20	0.21	0.21	0.22
Service Investments	1.201	1.057	1.102	1.189	1.245	1.245
Commercial Investments: Property	3.333	3.161	3.230	3.230	3.230	3.230
Total	6.07	5.57	5.67	5.74	5.78	5.76
Investment income as a proportion of expenditure	18.57%	16.76%	16.64%	16.52%	16.31%	15.95%

* excluding Housing Benefit payments

Government guidance is that local authorities must not borrow more than, or in advance of their needs, purely in order to profit from the investment of the extra sums borrowed. The Council has plans to borrow in 2025/26 to finance the replacement of the Waste fleet but has no plans to borrow in advance of need.

Scrutiny Arrangements

The Executive will make recommendations to full Council on new investments that are not considered to be covered under the Treasury Management strategy.

Financial Performance is reported quarterly to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to the Executive. This includes the performance of all income and expenditure against budget.

An annual report on Commercial Property will be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which will include yield, valuation and risk to future revenue. Treasury Management performance is reported quarterly to the Council's Audit & Governance Committee and Executive.

The Council's internal audit provider South West Audit Partnership Ltd (SWAP) regularly audit the Council's Treasury Management activity and its processes and procedures for approving investment and performance management. SWAP report to the Council's Audit and Governance Committee.

Investment Indicators

The Council has set the following quantitative indicators to allow elected members and the public to assess the Council's total risk exposure as a result of its investment decisions.

The table below shows the Council's total exposure to potential investment losses. This would include amounts the Council is contractually committed to lend but have yet to be drawn down, but no such obligations exist at this point in time.

The Council has issued no guarantees to any third party loans.

Total investment exposure £m

	31st Mar 2024 Actual £m	31st Mar 2025 Forecast £m	31st Mar 2026 Forecast £m
Treasury Management investments	30.28	33.09	33.09
Service Investments: Loans	10.355	10.121	9.887
Property investments	53.24	53.24	49.74
Total investments / exposure	93.88	96.46	92.72

Government guidance is that these indicators should include how investments are funded. Since the Council does not normally associate particular assets with particular loan liabilities, and future investments may require external borrowing because of previous internal borrowing, this guidance is difficult to comply with. The capital financing requirement (CFR) gives an indication of how much internal borrowing the Council has undertaken so far and also shows how that funding position is expected to move towards external borrowing over time.

Currently, all of the Council's investments have been funded by usable reserves, capital receipts and cash balances but the refinancing of some internal borrowing will be required in 2025/26 to fund the capital programme.

Forecast borrowing requirement £m

	2024/25 Forecast £m	2025/26 Forecast £m	2026/27 Forecast £m	2027/28 Forecast £m	2028/29 Forecast £m
Capital Financing Requirement (CFR)	28.62	34.54	33.50	32.15	31.06
Less external borrowing	0.00	(3.35)	(3.85)	(3.85)	(3.85)
Internal borrowing	28.62	31.19	29.65	28.30	27.21
Usable reserves	(28.54)	(27.82)	(24.54)	(18.97)	(12.51)
Working capital	(13.34)	(14.01)	(13.31)	(14.64)	(13.17)
Cash available for investments	(13.26)	(10.64)	(8.20)	(5.30)	1.52

The table below shows the investment income received, less the associated costs, as a proportion of the sum initially invested. Note that due to the complex local government accounting framework, not all recorded gains and losses affect the revenue account in the year they are incurred. It is also worth noting that while all of these investments have previously been funded by internal borrowing, and therefore currently have no cost of

borrowing associated with them, new investments will be financed by external borrowing and some current investments may also have to be refinanced with external borrowing and the interest rate associated with that will reduce their return accordingly.

Investment net rate of return

	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
	Actual	Forecast	Forecast
Treasury Management	4.97%	4.75%	4.62%
<u>Service investments: Loans</u>			
Local Businesses	3.85%	3.85%	3.85%
Town & Parish Councils	1.40%	1.40%	1.40%
Housing Associations	2.56%	2.56%	2.56%
Local Residents (equity loans)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Commercial investments	5.49%	6.26%	6.35%

The Councils £1 share in both Ubico and Publica is not held to generate any return via a dividend or growth in value. They are both profit sharing companies and any savings or surplus generated results in lower contract fees for shareholders.

The Treasury Management return is diluted by the large amount of cash held as short term, highly liquid funds. For returns on higher interest earning pooled funds, please see the Treasury Management Strategy paper.

The table above shows the importance to the support of the Council's revenue budget of the current commercial investment portfolio.

Summary of knowledge and skills available to the Council:

The Council employ professionally qualified and experienced staff in senior positions with responsibility for making capital expenditure, borrowing and investment decisions. The Chief Finance Officer and several members of the finance team are qualified accountants with extensive experience. The Council pays for junior staff to study towards relevant professional qualifications such as the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

Where Council staff do not have the knowledge and skills required, external advisers and consultants that are specialists in their field are utilised. The Council currently employs Arlingclose Limited as treasury management advisers. The Council employs other specialist consultants to advise upon specific, extra-ordinary transactions as required. Examples of such transactions include property acquisitions, and loans to third parties. This approach is more cost effective than employing such staff directly and ensures that the Council has access to knowledge and skills as and when needed.

The Council has experience of investing in commercial property in recent years. The Council's property service is currently provided through its strategic service provider Publica Group (Support) Ltd, but will transfer back to the Council in 2025/26, The team of property officers have the following qualifications:

- BSc Hons Real Estate Management
- Associate Member Royal Institute Chartered Surveyors
- Member Royal Institute Chartered Surveyors
- Royal Institute Chartered Surveyors Registered Valuer
- Member institute welfare & facilities management
- Technical member of institute for occupational safety and health
- CIMA cert BA

The Council's legal team have experience of carrying out due diligence checks, particularly for commercial property acquisitions, and the legal officers have the following qualifications:

- Fellows of the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives (CILEx)
- Student Member of the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives
- Solicitors

The Property and Legal teams work together with the Finance team to support the Council's Chief Finance Officer in developing investment proposals for the Council.

Overview of Strategies

The Council's Capital Strategy is concerned with its future plans for investments in a broad range of projects, the funding for these is underpinned by the Treasury Management Strategy while the Investment Strategy considers the type of investments the Council might make in the context of the risk profile and return of those it already holds.