

Appendix 2 – Data Manager Report 2023-2025

1. Introduction:

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the activities undertaken by the Data Manager.

2. Project Summary:

- 2.1 In 2023-24 the role of data manager was introduced for a pilot period of 2 years ending 31-3-2025. The post has been extended for a further 12 months. The role of Data Manager (DM) was envisioned as a way of developing data led methodologies for detecting various fraud and financial irregularities as well as other data led services that could be offered to other organisations but that would also support the needs of Oxford City Council.

3. Progress Plan:

The original plan for the DM is summarised as:

- Finalise or hand over any existing projects from previously held role of officer, including finalising work on the Covid Grant Post payment assurance, Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS) and handing over the Single Person Discount Review to other staff in the team.
- Meet with several stakeholders within the authority where it was felt that data could be leveraged to develop a service, and to gauge appetite.
- Identify other products believed to be of value externally to OCC.
- Agree projects to develop and deliver internally.
- Develop and market internally developed products to other organisations.

4. Progress Overview:

- 4.1 Meetings were held with several key stakeholders within the authority. Following these meetings, it was decided to focus on four key projects:

1. Work with Housing Allocations to create a review of the housing waiting list
2. Work with Revenues and Benefits to create an online review of Council Tax Reduction Scheme awards
3. Create a property tenure review tool to support the Selective Licencing scheme.
4. Develop a housing tenant review solution

- 4.2 No capacity was available in the team to hand over existing work and projects. This had a knock-on effect on the project plan, significantly reducing the time available to work on planned projects and delaying their implementation and completion.

- 4.3 Work on the Council Tax Single Person Discount review project was completed with an overrun into Q4 of 2023-24 .

The review resulted in £411,522 being billed to customers for the 23/24 financial year, with an estimated £713,844 of increased income over the next 2 billing years. This makes the 23/24 SPD review the most successful review undertaken by OCC since the review was brought back in-house in 2016. This was the final SPD project to be undertaken by the investigations team.

- 4.4 **Air BnB lets Project** – to establish if through publicly available data if it would be possible to identify social housing properties that were being let through Air BnB or similar sites. This project was identified as it was felt that Social Housing fraud via Air BnB lets was likely to be a significant issue. Many other councils, especially those in tourist locations, have found this to be that case though Oxford is yet to identify any of our housing stock being used in this way.

Extensive work was carried out over a 6-month period. Whilst a methodology was developed for finding Airbnb properties, it proved to be extremely time intensive and when applied to Oxford City Council housing stock, no properties were identified for investigation.

- 4.5 **Housing Tenancy Review Project** - to create a multi data set risk matrix for predicting social housing fraud. Social housing fraud is a major issue for all local authorities and social housing providers. Being able to proactively identify social housing properties at high risk of being sublet or left unoccupied has substantial financial value.

Local authorities are currently seeing a vast increase in the number of individuals and households requiring temporary accommodation which places a vast financial burden on local authorities. Identifying and recovering social housing properties increases the number of available properties. Sublet and unoccupied properties are also at greater risk of not being maintained and falling into disrepair, leading to higher costs to return to a lettable standard.

The project identified several key data sets held by local authorities and housing associations. These data sets individually appear to hold little value but when overlaid with each other and enhanced with 3rd party data, produced a risk matrix that successfully identified the risk of social housing fraud. This service has been sold to another local authority and is now a plug and play saleable product being actively marketed.

- 4.6 **The Council Tax Reduction Review** – following on from the success of the Single Person Discount review, which utilised a dedicated customer portal , provided by an external supplier, consideration was given to using the platform for the Council Tax Reduction Review exercise.

However, after a review of difficulties that some customers experienced in using the portal, coupled with a change in ICT policy relating to the use of external platforms for customer facing service provision, the project had to pivot.

Following consultation with the project stakeholders (Revenues and Benefits Manager) a new solution and timescale was agreed. The project has since been subject to multiple delays due to updates to the Civica platform and is now on hold until the system is moved to the cloud.

- 4.7 **Housing Waiting List-** to create a multi data set risk matrix for identifying Housing Waiting List applications that have not reported a change in circumstances that would affect their banding or nil entitle them.

Following on from the success of the Housing Tenancy risk matrix project it was felt that the Housing Waiting List was an obvious choice for the same approach. Although originally profiled to complete by mid-2024, the project to develop a “plug and play” Housing Waiting List review solution was delayed due to the software supplier not updating algorithms timeously.

Internal work on the project had been completed and testing with internal data was carried out as planned. Results were passed to Housing in quarters 3&4 of 2023-24. This resulted in 56 housing applications being cancelled from a relatively small batch of applications. The applications were cancelled as the data match evidenced that they had not reported significant changes in their circumstances that would have affected their banding on the waiting list.

The learnings from this were then applied to the amended 3rd party data algorithm once available. A further 34 applications were cancelled by making use of the updated algorithm. The product is now plug and play ready and is actively being marketed to other local authorities and housing associations.

An enhanced version of the matrix is currently being developed which adds further changes in circumstances that can be detected. The first results from this will be ready to pass to Allocations by the end of July 2025.

- 4.8 **Tenure Prediction Tool** – Based on the work done for the Social Housing Fraud and Housing Waiting List projects, it was felt that the methodology could be applied to a Tenure Prediction Tool Matrix.

By utilising key data sets, such as occupancy and electoral roll history, a matrix would be created to help the identify properties in the private rented sector that are in scope for the Selective Licensing Scheme but which are yet to apply for a licence.

Work continues on the Tenure Prediction Tool and although this project has been repeatedly side-lined due to other work priorities, it is still the intention to create this tool. It is currently in scope for the first version to be passed to Regulatory Services by the end of Summer 2025.

- 4.9 **NFI Cannock Chase** – Following the engagement of the Investigation Team by Cannock Chase District Council (CCDC) to supply on demand investigation services, CCDC approached the team to conduct their Housing

focused National Fraud Initiative matches. The service is now being provided to CCDC by the Data Manager.

- 4.10 **Second Homes Review** – to create a data led methodology of establishing undeclared 2nd homes for the purposes of Council Tax liability, and verifying the removal of second home status to prevent the evasion of the second homes premium.

Following an approach from a large London borough as to whether we would be able to assist them in review their tax base for second homes, work is underway to establish a data match and visiting protocol to meet their needs. Work on the project is in its infancy but shows promise as a viable and saleable product.

- 4.11 The Data Manager has been developing commercial leads with multiple local authorities and housing associations in the period. A number of these leads are developing with interest shown in data matching and investigation services.
- 4.12 The Data Manager attended the Tenancy Fraud Forum Conference in April 2024 & 25 and the Public Sector Counter Fraud Conference 2025, exhibiting with the Oxford Investigation Service trade stand. Specific marketing material for data services had been developed for these events. This resulted in a number of leads with follow-up meetings taking place.

5. Next Steps:

Plan for 2025/26

- Finalise all outstanding projects and have the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Review operational.
- Complete the Tenure Prediction Tool following feedback from Licencing staff.
- Explore further marketing opportunities to develop leads, selling the data matches that have been developed with targeted additional income for 2025-26 of £15,000

6. Conclusion and learnings:

The 2023-2025 financial years saw several unforeseen events that impacted the intended Data Manager workplan. However, the output and work achieved has been successful for the Council. Time has been dedicated to developing contracts for services and it is believed that provision of services externally is imminent. A solid offering and dedicated literature for data services has been developed and is being actively promoted at the Oxford Annual Fraud Conference and external conferences.