



INTRODUCTION

As part of the Local Government Finance Settlement issued to Councils in December 2023 was a requirement for Councils to produce productivity plans. In April 2024 the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUCH) issued Chief Executives with a letter detailing the type of things the productivity plans should include, but they were not prescriptive in terms of providing a standard proforma or requesting specific data.

The Government have acknowledged that there has already been a great deal of work in recent years on improving productivity and efficiency. But with the current financial climate and impacts of lockdown and post lockdown Councils are being asked to continue finding new ways of working and delivering. The aim of the productivity plans is to understand what is working well and what more the Government can do to enable new opportunities.

The Government have requested that the plan should consider the following four areas where appropriate:

1. How you have transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources.
2. How you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources.
3. Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems.
4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.

This plan will be used alongside the Transformation Plan and Medium-Term Financial Strategy and updated regularly to ensure it is up to date and delivering the Council Corporate Plan.

1. HOW YOU HAVE TRANSFORMED THE WAY YOU DESIGN AND DELIVER SERVICES TO MAKE BETTER USE OF RESOURCES

North Warwickshire Borough Council has been on a transformation journey for the last few years delivering improved services, increased productivity, and efficiencies. This has been delivered through IT transformation, Service redesign, Working with Partners, and Commercialism. This will continue as detailed in this productivity plan, along with the Councils Transformation plan and Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

IT TRANSFORMATION

- The use of IT has facilitated working remotely, meeting over Teams and led to the Council introducing new ways of working. Hybrid working is encouraged for most services increasing productivity and reducing the need for office space. Since Covid-19 the Councils more flexible approach to working has assisted with staff retention and recruitment and given the opportunity to rent office space to other partners and generate additional income.
- A comprehensive programme of IT replacement and enhancement with digital by design and automation at the centre. The digital strategy will continue to be reviewed and delivered as this can generate significant efficiency savings and increased customer service.
- A new hosted Environmental Health system with more functionality for officers and customers.
- A new Planning and Local Land Charge system to improve productivity and customer service and achieve compliance.
- A new website with updated look and feel, enhanced search and responsive design for mobile devices. The aspiration is to implement a channel shift in the way customers transact with the Council. We will not close any method down but make it much easier to use self-service.
- The implementation of a web-based GIS module.
- The implementation of an email and text subscription marketing solution, that allows us to send personalised bulletins to our subscriber.
- The introduction of when 'applying for council house/accommodation' form. The process has been designed to 'carry out' the initial assessment by intelligent form design.
- During Covid-19 we implemented a hybrid mail solution.
- We have installed new Artificial Intelligence cameras for Fly Tipping within parts of our rural borough to help reduce fly-tipping. The solution generates alerts for movement (people, cars, wildlife) rather than officers trawling through old fashioned CCTV cameras that record everything.

SERVICE REDESIGN

- Virtual Reception - During Covid-19 the main reception was closed which led to customers finding new ways of interacting with the Council. When services started to open again the reception was reviewed and a decision was made to have a virtual reception for this Council. In our reception there is an iPad with a n officer from the customer contact team managing queries from the public. This has been in place for a year and needs to be reviewed to ensure it is meeting the needs of customers whilst remaining an efficient way of managing the reception.
- Waste changes - The waste collections were being reviewed with the use of the InCab technology on rounds and potential options for optimisation. This has not been delivered yet as the Government decided to introduce food waste collections which impact on collections. This project will continue to be developed when the Government give more information on timescales.
- A newly formed Transformation team has been implemented to facilitate the delivery of the ambitious transformation plan its needs to buy in from all staff to ensure successful delivery.

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

- Office Rationalisation – sharing with other agencies police, DWP, county council, Town Council. Improving customer service by co locating DWP with Council and generating additional income by utilising the space more efficiently.

- To maintain services due to reductions in funding the Council has worked with Towns/Parishes, Community Groups to secure the services the public want to keep.
- Leisure Facilities – the Council have worked with partners such as County Council and NHS to develop LUF 1 & 2 bids for a new leisure facility in Atherstone. Both bids were unsuccessful, so the Council is looking at options along with partners to build a new facility in Polesworth and replace the current fifty-year-old leisure facility with pool in Atherstone. This is all part of the overall strategy for leisure. To reduce ongoing revenue costs and deliver facilities fit for purpose and low cost.

COMMERCIALISM

- Review of Fees and Charges – During 2024/25 Tax Set members approved a charging strategy for fees and charges. The strategy included increasing fees by at least inflation and looking to at least break even on services such as Cess Pool emptying and green waste collection.
- Leisure Services – The Council agreed to develop a LATCO for delivery of the leisure function, however with the changes in VAT rules this changed to financial implications making this option marginal. Therefore, at the Tax Set meeting in February members approved a fundamental review of the provision of leisure services in order to reduce the subsidy at approximately £1.3 million per annum.
- Single Persons Discount and empty homes reviews – These reviews take place on a regular basis (every 2 years) as the loss of income through incorrect discounts can be significant.
- New Build Units to increase housing stock – The programme continues to build much needed housing and to utilise the Right to Buy receipts. The Council has been looking at a Housing Company as a vehicle to deliver more houses and generate additional income for reinvestment.
- The Transformation plan will be measured by cashable efficiency savings, relevant key performance indicators and consultation with customers. Reductions and increased income of £2 million is required over the period of the MTFS.

2. HOW YOU PLAN TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY AND MAKE BETTER USE OF DATA TO IMPROVE DECISION MAKING, SERVICE DESIGN AND USE OF RESOURCES

This Council is refining its approach to performance reporting with the Performance Management Framework Introducing new performance reporting with interactive reporting to allow for real-time data to help drive decisions and service improvements across the council. Power BI is an essential part of this review given its functionality in terms of producing complex reporting.

For the 2024/25 budget a public consultation exercise was carried out for the first time to capture residents' views on a number of topics including VFM for their Council Tax, use of Leisure and general satisfaction with the Council. This information was valuable to shaping the corporate plan and the budgetary decisions. More consultation with residents will continue to ensure our resources are directed to the issues they value most. This will ensure direct funding decisions in the Budget are linked to key issues identified by residents.

The Council will continue to work with partners on the Levelling Up agenda using data on key indicators within our communities to target interventions and support.

Use of data to target priority areas for Community Development work has been successful in directing funding and projects.

The Transformation programme has a number of new systems to implement all of which will contribute to better use and availability of data. This includes:

- A new hosted Finance System which has increased functionality for reporting which will assist in producing the data required for the numerous Statutory Government returns that have to be returned.
- A new InCab system for waste rounds, which includes real-time collections calendars for our residents and will assist in optimising collection rounds.
- NWBC are a partner of the Sherbourne Materials Recycling Facility which has technology which can determine the details of the waste and recycling rates etc, all data assists in working with residents to educate, increase recycling rates and deliver savings.
- A new hosted planning and local land charges system
- A new hosted payment management system which will allow re-occurring card payments and Direct Debits

3. YOUR PLANS TO REDUCE WASTEFUL SPEND WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION AND SYSTEMS

This is already documented in the Councils transformation plan and [MTFS](#), but will continue to be reviewed and updated to ensure it is delivering the against the plans and remains appropriate.

Invest to Save is supported by this Council and as part of the 2024 Tax Set a specific fund was approved totalling £1m to use towards invest to save initiatives such as Asset Rationalisation, Commercialism. The council is currently reviewing its asset portfolio in order to identify assets that may have development potential, could be sold generating a capital receipt or need to be maintained. The Asset Management Plan will be based on this review and the capital programme will need to be amended to reflect this plan. Already the investment assets have been reviewed to ensure the rents are in line with the market to ensure a commercial approach is taken where appropriate. The Council has also been working with Housing Specialists to setup a housing company to build more housing to meet need and potentially generate income for reinvesting in Council services.

Agency and Interim Spend – The Council operates direct frontline services such as Waste Collection and Housing Maintenance and due to the nature of these services an agency budget is required to ensure these services can be delivered daily in the event of staff absences and vacancies. But this is being reviewed through service redesign such as ensuring resources are being maximised through optimising collection routes.

This Council is going through a significant period of change and delivery and as such there are interim staff for delivery of certain projects, Leisure Management, Asset Management and rationalisation, Implementation of New Finance System, Waste collection service redesign. When each project is delivered the Interim support will end. It is likely that the cost will be less than the reductions identified in most cases making these invest to save initiatives. This will be monitored, and a review of the project will include the cost of delivery compared to the reductions achieved and the service improvements.

Senior Management Restructure – The Council is currently implementing a new structure which is fit for purpose and sustainable based on a LGA DMA review late last year. In order to maintain service delivery, deliver the corporate plan priorities, ensure the MTFS is being delivered and the ambitious change agenda is implemented the two interim Directors will remain assisting the Chief Executive until the new structure is in place.

Service Delivery – Due to this Council being a relatively small borough council it already has a number of services which are shared or procured from other Councils. The largest shared

arrangement is with Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council (NBBC) for the Revenues and Benefits service which also includes the Civica system which is hosted at NBBC. Each council has its own staff delivering the service, but the management and system are operated on a shared basis. This arrangement has delivered reductions and efficiency savings and continues to improve productivity. Shared services also exist currently for Elections. These arrangements are reviewed regularly to ensure they are still offering Value for Money (VFM) and the service is still meeting performance targets. From April 2024 the Housing Grants function was taken back in house due to issues with performance.

Building control is procured through a partnership arrangement managed by Lichfield Council. Payroll is delivered using the Coventry IT system with NWBC staff inputting the data. The e learning module is purchased through Staffordshire County Council. Fraud service is delivered by Derby City Council from April 2024 and the Internal Audit function is provided by an internal resource working alongside the Combined Midlands Audit Partnership (CMAP). This Council is always open to opportunities to work with partners to deliver services and improve efficiency, each opportunity would be subject to a business case.

The Council Offices are shared with partners, Police, County Council and DWP and Town Council. All of which pay a rent to offset the costs of the building. It is important to keep this under review as maximising the office space and generating additional income assist with the MRFS. It also provides a more coordinated service to customers using more than one agency.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is not a specific role within the Council its embedded into the organisation all officers are encouraged to consider EDI when developing policies, services etc and to use tools such as Equality Impact Assessments. Training is included with the corporate training plan on a rolling programme of topics over a 3-year period, this is predominately online and therefore low cost. If required specific courses are delivered on a mandatory basis to all staff.

This Council has an excellent working relationship with our union representatives, and they are included in Job Evaluations and moderation panels, have items on Management Team agendas and a monthly joint meeting with Management and HR. This relationship has been essential in the successful delivery of transformation and will continue particularly in this period of huge change where staff need support. This cost is not budgeted, as in percentage terms of the overall staffing budget it is negligible but the benefits to the organisation and staff are vast.

4. THE BARRIERS PREVENTING PROGRESS THAT THE GOVERNMENT CAN HELP TO REDUCE OR REMOVE

The most significant barriers to local productivity which the Government could assist with is single-year finance settlements. Without the clarity of medium-term funding councils cannot effectively plan and organise their resources. Along with the delays and uncertainty with fair funding, business rates retention and future of New Homes Bonus all of which have a massive impact on the Councils financial planning and sustainability depending on the outcomes.

Other issues which are barriers the Government should consider include the following:

- Advance engagement in development of funding initiatives and policies before implementation, to reduce bureaucracy and ensure they are fit for purpose.

- Greater flexibility to decide how to raise and spend money locally. To make decisions on whether certain services should be taken out of current Government funding methodology, such as Social Care?
- Take a view on Council services funding, should some services fully recover cost such as planning, whilst other services such as parks, leisure should they continue to be subsidised because of their value in terms of health and wellbeing initiatives potentially preventing costs on the NHS?
- Look at the funding formula to ensure sparsity and rural authorities are not disadvantaged.
- 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.
- Remove or reduce the wide range of separate one-off revenue and capital grant pots with onerous, costly, and counter-productive bidding processes potentially making the work involved more costly than the funding awarded.
- Complicated and inconsistent processes for submitting data returns to central government.
- Lack of join-up between central government departments on issues including housing, homelessness prevention, business support and asylum dispersal
- Excessive amount of information that is required in annual accounts or must be published under the transparency code.
- Lack of clear guidance on Audit backlogs putting additional pressure on capacity.
- The constraints on the use of Right to Buy receipts makes it difficult to build new affordable homes.
- Uncertainty over significant service changes such as funding for weekly food waste does not encourage Councils to go for efficiency/ productivity as early as possible because there is often funding offered when the change is forced by Government. Although this funding can often be capital only which leaves the Council picking up ongoing revenue implications.
- In addition to the full cost recovery on planning fees to eliminate the public subsidy of planning developments mentioned above, allow Councils to set local fees to resource quicker decisions or to prioritise developments which fit the local area better.

Conclusion

We are a small but ambitious Borough Council we have robust budget management and a challenging but positive MTFs to ensure we can deliver the priorities in our Corporate Plan. We have already delivered a number of projects within our Transformation plan delivering improved productivity and financial savings, which will continue. The Council is currently going through a huge amount of change including a Senior Management restructure, a desire from members to be more commercial with setting up a housing company, a review of leisure management, assets, and a commitment to build two new leisure facilities. A busy agenda which will deliver for the residents and provide financial sustainability in the future.