

**BOROUGH COUNCIL OF KING'S LYNN
AND WEST NORFOLK**

**PRODUCTIVITY PLAN
JULY 2024**

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk comprises the urban area of King's Lynn, together with the market towns of Downham Market and Hunstanton, surrounded by 102 parishes. A large, predominately rural district of 550sq miles with a population of approximately 155,000. The borough is the second largest district council in the country by area.
- 1.2 King's Lynn was identified as a priority area for Levelling Up, across a range of government programmes, including Towns Fund, Rural England Prosperity Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Funding. In 2022, Norfolk County Council submitted a successful bid for Levelling Up funding for the Southgate's Masterplan and was awarded £24m for a project which will deliver active travel, heritage and sustainability improvements as well as strengthening the identity of the town and offer benefits for residents and visitors.
- 1.3 The borough council has always had an ambitious agenda for residents, businesses and visitors to the area and a keen sense of its role as the representative and custodian of place. This has materialised through the regeneration schemes, the high-quality environment, the provision of homes for a rising population and the quality and sustainability of services. This has been underpinned by successful management of finances to create the capacity and focus for improving the area, strengthening our collaboration with partners and a strong prioritisation of the most important activities and frontline services. The council has adapted to local and national challenges such as key staff shortages in Planning, Environmental Health, Finance, and ICT and continues to focus on being an attractive and flexible employer, as well as creating an area where people want to work and live.
- 1.4 The council had operated under a Conservative Administration for 20 years until May 2023 when the local elections resulted in 'no overall control'. The council is now led by the Independent Partnership, a mix of Independent, Green and Liberal Democrat councillors, with the support of the Labour Group and the newly formed Progressive Partnership. The new Administration published their 4-year Corporate Strategy in November 2023 with four key priorities:
- Promote growth and prosperity to benefit West Norfolk
 - Protect our Environment
 - Efficient and effective delivery of our services
 - Support our communities
- 1.5 The council has a history of having clear robust plans to manage its resources, invest in the borough and protect the most vulnerable – despite reduced government funding, rising demand for services and increasing cost. The council continues to make strong representations for fair and transparent funding arrangements for local government which take account of the particular pressures of rural authorities, and in the case of West Norfolk, the funding arrangements to address the flood and drainage responsibilities met

through the Internal Drainage Board levies which cost the borough over £3.5m a year or 42% of our Council Tax income. We continue to lobby the Government for short- and long-term funding solutions to this ongoing and unequitable pressure on our resources.

- 1.6 Previous to 23/24, we have had to use our General Reserves to produce a balanced budget, but this year with compound inflation affecting much of our cost base of £48m by around 14%, we have maintained expenditure within budget against a financial settlement of less than 4%.
- 1.7 Despite the challenging financial position, we haven't reduced our discretionary services and due to a stringent cost management programme with our Senior Leadership Team, we have reduced our cost base by 2.5%.
- 1.8 Regeneration has been a key focus of the organisation with many projects either delivered or underway, underpinning our aspirations for the future economy and for investment in our communities and businesses to enable them to achieve the best outcomes possible. To be successful, it is essential that we build our capacity to deliver, as well as our resilience to meet future service demand. Current challenges, not unique to West Norfolk include:
 - Strengthening strategic workforce planning to ensure the workforce have the skills, capacity, and knowledge to deliver the council's priorities
 - Staff retention and recruitment
 - Managing talent and succession planning
- 1.9 The organisation is currently undergoing considerable change at Senior Management level, with two Executive Directors and the Chief Executive retiring during 2024. A new Chief Executive has been appointed and will commence in early Autumn 2024. This provides the organisation with an excellent opportunity to build on the work already completed, with new talent joining the organisation, bringing with them their skills and experience to put in place an organisational structure to lead the organisation and to deliver the ambitions set out in the Corporate Strategy.

2. How have we transformed the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources?

- 2.1 The council is continuously reviewing the way it provides and delivers services to our residents, visitors, and businesses, set against the backdrop of our Best Value Duty. Some examples of this include:
 - 2.1.1 Entered into a shared procurement and contract for our Waste Management Services, working with two nearby district councils to benefit from economies of scale and pricing
 - 2.1.2 Our Operations and Commercial service already provide car parking services for a number of Norfolk District Council's and the Highways Authority. During 2023 the largest, by transaction, authority, Norwich City transferred its car

parking back-office function to our Parking Operations team. This bought additional financial contributions towards our operational overheads whilst enabling the highways authority to see a reduction in the recharge cost. Parking Operations were able to absorb some of that work in its existing staffing allocation by extending the operating hours to include evenings and weekends where we have staff available, who are required to be on site, but had spare capacity to assist in the delivery of the new service. Moving from a traditional office hours only service previously provided by Norwich City to a 16hr a day, 7 day a week service provided by ourselves. Customers have also seen an improvement in the service delivered.

- 2.1.3 Created two wholly owned local authority housing companies, West Norfolk Housing and West Norfolk Property. One provides affordable housing to people in need, reducing the reliance on and cost of Bed and Breakfast accommodation (which has increased exponentially following the pandemic) and the other providing privately rented properties, from the homes that have been created through our major housing programme.
- 2.1.4 Through our Digital Transformation Programme, we have improved our services to our residents through online forms, improved our website and created a Customer Service 'hub' which manages all service enquiries for customers. We have reduced our office space by closing two of our satellite offices and our three cash offices, reducing the cost of resources, income collection and Security Services charges. We have introduced online customer accounts, enabling customers to self-serve 24/7, personalising services for customers to be able to transact completely online. We have introduced webchat and are investigating how Artificial Intelligence can improve services for customers going forward.
- 2.1.5 With increased digitisation of our services, we have reduced our footprint in our main office and sub-let large areas of office space to other service providers including the Department of Work and Pensions. Whilst generating income, this also provides a 'one stop shop' for customers seeking help with their council tax and housing costs.
- 2.1.6 From our 2019/2020 baseline, we estimate we have reduced our net carbon emissions by 47%. We have achieved that by shifting electricity consumption to net zero sources, delivering two Refit programmes and a Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme that upgraded a range of our leisure facilities and offices with air and ground source heat pumps, new building control systems, insulation, and solar PV panels. We are also trialling two Battery Electric Vehicles (BEV's) in our fly tipping fleet.
- 2.1.7 We continue to deploy capital funds where possible to maximise efficiency and reduce revenue pressures. We have invested in building a two-screen cinema, utilising unused space in our theatre, increasing revenue, improving the entertainment offer to residents, and enhancing and improving the night-time economy within the town centre.

2.1.8 On local reforms, the Council continues to build on success in partnership working across the County in areas such as Building Control, Audit, Waste Management, Car Parking and CCTV. The CCTV service, which traditionally covered only West Norfolk and operates 24/7, 365 days and incorporates council out of hours services has worked in partnership with a number of public service bodies to deliver their services alongside our own. These partnerships include delivering CCTV in market towns in Breckland, extensive coverage within our local district hospital and the management of body worn video services for a number of partner authorities. Works are currently underway to extend these partnership arrangements to provide these services to the Environment Agency. In addition, we are looking to the increased funding available through the local devolution deal for the County Council which will allow for increased investment in a range of areas alongside better targeting of investment in areas such as skills and training which will be key to improving the productivity of the local businesses in our area.

2.1.9 In recognition of the disproportionate impact the cost-of-living crisis was having on our more deprived communities the council identified an empty building in its ownership and worked with the Purfleet Trust and Norfolk Community Foundation to open the Purfleet Pantry, a community shop. The pantry has made an enormous impact in the local community. The purpose of the Pantry is not solely to ease food insecurity but also to build a strong community with better health and wellbeing outcomes for the residents. This, together with our Early Help Hub are fundamental in our ambitions to focus on preventative action to stop even bigger issues in the future.

3. How do you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources?

3.1 The council's use of technology and digital services has increased substantially over the past ten years. A digital online account, providing online, personalised services was launched in 2018. Online payments and payments via PayPoint have been available since 2011. Online forms are integrated into our back-office systems via APIs to avoid duplicate entry of data. In 23/34, the council had over 1.5million user sessions on its corporate website and over 41,000 online forms were submitted by customers.

3.2 Digital services form a vital role within our Transformation Programme. We are currently upgrading our telephony system to integrate virtual AI for more routine enquiries, procuring new software for Performance Management, Risk Management monitoring and Freedom of Information administration, launching a new corporate Intranet to improve communications and internal administration as well as moving more of our legacy systems to cloud-based online services.

3.3 As a rural authority which retains some areas with poor connectivity as well as having a larger number of more elderly and digitally excluded residents, we are working hard to ensure those who have the ability and capacity as well as

the desire to self-serve are able to do so, enabling the council to focus its time and resources on those residents requiring more one-to-one and personalised support. We are working with Norfolk County Council on their digital inclusion programme and using the knowledge gained from this work to inform the development of our own digital inclusion strategy.

- 3.4 It can be difficult to drive down costs in respect of some software systems such as Revenues and Benefits as there are so few suppliers providing the systems as well as the large cost of entering into procurement and transferring systems. However, this also provides opportunities for working with neighbouring authorities who may share the same systems, thus providing opportunities for joint procurement which could drive down costs.
- 3.5 Our Corporate Strategy and associated Directorate Plans set out programmes to improve productivity through re-engineering with further software system rationalisation but also enhancement with emerging technologies.
- 3.6 Successful migration of data to SharePoint and the implementation of Office 365 has provided significant cost efficiencies and improved staff collaboration as well as efficiency. One of the key themes of our Data Strategy is focused on increasing the use of high-quality data to inform decision making. Some areas of the council have adopted Power BI for data visualisation. For corporate performance monitoring we are procuring new software, transitioning to modern analytical tools that facilitate self-service and automation. Publishing up to date dashboards of data instead of out-of-date PDFs of performance data will enable staff, members, and the public to view live data at any time. Work has also commenced on investigating how Microsoft Co-Pilot may support staff with more administrative tasks such as capturing minutes and actions from meetings and assisting with basic correspondence. Our Transformation Board are also commencing a Data Audit across the authority.
- 3.7 2.1.3 above discusses the increased workload within Parking Operations. This is enabled in part by the extensive use of technology including handheld computers used by the Civil Enforcement Officers to customers portals and an online knowledge base allowing users to self-serve in plain English.

4. Our plans to reduce wasteful spend within our organisation and systems

- 4.1 Following years of reduced government funding and making efficiencies to balance budgets has resulted in savings being made in a number of areas therefore there isn't excessive waste in our services. The council sets an annual budget and regular budget monitoring takes place and Cabinet and the council's Scrutiny Panels provides regular oversight of the council's finances.
- 4.2 Budget planning sessions are held annually with our Cabinet and Senior Leadership Team to discuss organisational performance and improvement ideas. We are also consulting with our residents on our budget development,

ensuring that our resources are deployed to the areas identified by them as priorities.

- 4.3 Procurement and Contract Management Training has been delivered for officers responsible for procuring goods, services and works. This has involved upskilling officers on specification writing and contract management to ensure contracts are delivering the best value for the Council.
- 4.4 There is an ongoing service area transformation programme within Procurement to make better use of e-procurement technology to improve competition for Council contracts, to improve efficiencies in contract completion and retention and also to increase the focus on social value and achieving corporate priorities through via procured contracts.
- 4.5 We are currently reviewing the governance model of our leisure and cultural facilities. Services are currently provided by a Local Authority Controlled Company (LACC) but a recent ruling on VAT law by the HMRC has resulted in the VAT advantages of providing these services through an LACC being no longer applicable. As a result, we are reviewing the delivery model with a view to having more control over the budget (which currently requires a subsidy of over £2m per year) to reduce costs.
- 4.6 A lack of capital investment in our leisure centres has resulted in the building structures requiring significant investment, especially in respect of energy efficiency and carbon reduction. This is a key priority for the organisation, as it will be a key factor in achieving our net zero target by 2035.
- 4.7 The council has reviewed its procedures for supporting EDI issues, including revising its equality working group, with refresher training provided to group members at a cost of £1,596. Workstreams are focussed on priority areas which will assist the Council in demonstrating how it meets the public sector equality duty. Training has been delivered to Elected Members following the local elections in 2023 to ensure Members are aware of their role and responsibilities with regards to equalities and the PSED (at a cost of £2794.47).
- 4.8 In line with national trends, the council is experiencing challenges with recruiting, staff, particularly in professional services such as finance, environment health and planning. This has led to the ongoing use of agency staff to cover some vacancies we have been unable to fill. For 2023/24, our spend on Agency Staff fees totalled £384,853, against an original budget of £50,470. Work has been undertaken to enhance our approach to advertising vacancies and to improve our offer to staff.
- 4.9 King's Lynn and West Norfolk were awarded £25m Towns Funding for capital projects to enhance and improve our Town Centre. These projects have necessitated the need for an increased spend on external consultants over the past five years as the council does not have the resource and expertise required to deliver on these major capital projects. For 2023/25, our spend on professional fees including external consultants and legal advice totalled

£688,000, although a percentage of this has come from the capital grant money.

5.0 The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove

5.1 Single year funding levels are insufficient to allow the council to improve local service provision and the timing of settlements combined with current market forces hampers good financial planning, making it difficult to fund services and take strategic, medium to long term decisions that will improve outcomes in a sustainable way. A five-year funding deal would enable the council to plan forward and use real data in the Medium-Term Financial Plan, rather than assumptions and projections.

5.2 Internal Drainage Board (IDB) levies are paid by the council to the various Boards. The levies count as spending of the Council, but no contribution is made by Government as part of the financial settlement. Any increase in the levies impacts on our council taxpayers. 43% of the income collected by the council goes in levies to the IDB's. Many councils do not have IDB's which enables them to retain their share of council tax income. We have made numerous representations to Government on this issue but wish to highlight it again through this Productivity Plan. We ask the Government to recognise the financial burden placed on the council and that by considering this when making the financial settlement would be fairer on the residents of west Norfolk who are asked to fund IDB's.

5.3 The process to bid for Government Grants is lengthy and time consuming and often, to an unrealistic deadline. This process is wasteful if the bid for funding is unsuccessful. A council without the resources to waste on a speculative bid can therefore miss out on vital funding which would benefit their area. Bids for funding can be made, but a recognition of the cost and resource involved, along with a realistic timescale to make the bid should be considered by Government.

5.4 Years of austerity and reduced government finance settlements have impacted on our resources to invest in productivity and preventative measures which could save money across the wider public services. Cost pressures across the public sector have resulted in partner agencies reverting to providing statutory services only, which, in turn, impacts on the services required from the local authority. We wish for Government to fully consider the wider impact of decisions and how those decisions affect the resource and capability of the council to deliver new initiatives alongside our statutory and discretionary services. Our organisation understands and is keen to progress our transformation and productivity aspirations but lack the resource needed to dedicate the officers and time to focus on this important area of work.

5.5 The Government should consider localising decisions such as the setting of Council Tax. The restrictions currently in place to not permit the council the autonomy to make decisions which reflect our particular circumstances.

- 5.6 Modernisation/review of legislation, such as those requiring publication in local newspapers.
- 5.7 The Government should consider bringing back an up-to-date model Constitution, including Contract Standing Orders and satellite governance protocols and guidance. Whilst this should be open for each Council to amend as they see fit, it is non-sensical that so many Councils pay so many private providers to support them individually on drafting complex documents when ultimately every local authority has the same core functions and governance arrangements. Oflog should be looking at this. More generally, there needs to be more centralised production and sharing of templates and best practice between Councils, whether it be the Constitution, forms of contract, grant agreements, Council company governance documents, transformation programmes, etc to cut out the wasteful spend of up to 314 individual authorities paying external costs for the same thing.