

Ashfield District Council Productivity Plan 2024/25

1. Introduction

Our ambition is to be 'Great' across all our services. Our priorities for the future are underpinned by a specific focus on innovation and improvement driven by digital and service transformation, an enhanced focus on identifying savings and income to support the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, whilst improving the customer journey and experience across all services.

2. What have we already achieved?

Details of the Council's financial performance, economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its use of resources over the financial year 2023/24, and its prospects for future years, are contained in the Draft Statement of Accounts Narrative Report.

<https://www.ashfield.gov.uk/media/n4tn4mwt/draft-statement-of-accounts-2023-2024.pdf>. Key areas of transformation have been: -

Organisational Redesign - Fast tracking our Digital and Service Transformation programme.

We have a specific focus on service improvement through a dedicated Service Review Programme, ensuring each service under review is fit for purpose based on changing needs aligned to the Corporate Plan. Service reviews are not solely to save money, being also focussed on improving the customer experience and accessibility to services, whilst improving performance.

In 2022 we engaged LGA support to complete a Decision-Making Accountability (DMA) review which identified how the Council could maximise its ability and organisational structures to deliver its ambitions both now and into the future. The DMA review provided an opportunity to align functions and to improve synergy between service areas.

There have also been significant investments in digital transformation, both in the creation of a new Digital Team and the investment in modern, cloud-based solutions, with a significant focus on modernising and improving our solution architecture. The Digital Transformation programme has now delivered approaching £3.9m of financial benefits (cashable and cost avoidance) over the last six years.

In-house digital development is now also leading more modern approaches in our waste and street cleansing services, including the intelligent automation of several operational processes.

Agile Workforce - Continuing to embed hybrid working across the organisation.

Our changes to working practices and the embedding of hybrid working have enabled the Council to rationalise our office space, delivering a cumulative £1.4m cashable

efficiency. Technological capability has also enabled us to redesign working practices, facilitating the ability for parts of our operations workforce to receive work directly to a device, travelling directly to site from home.

Invest to Save (Non-digital)

We have recently created a new Policy and Performance function, on an invest to save basis, that will lead robust delivery of an enhanced, extensive, rolling, service review programme. Our targets are to identify and deliver between £250-£500k per annum cashable or cost avoidance efficiencies.

The Council has also refocussed in-house resource specifically to lead our procurement approaches and the delivery of social value through our procurement activity. Cumulative Procurement Social Value delivered since the measurement via the Social Value Portal is now over £2.4m.

3. Plans for 2024/25

Coupled with the robust approach to budget management and transformation, the Council has robust reserves which will assist in transitioning to revised levels of Central Government funding whilst at the same time identifying and implementing 'Options for Change' to assist with addressing the Council's future financial challenges.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty brought about by the delay of Local Government Funding Reform, the estimated cumulative funding gap significantly rises from 2025/26 to 2026/27 with the largest proportion of this funding gap expected to be in 2026/27, assuming this is the year in which Local Government Funding Reform is implemented.

As set out in the Council's 2024/25 Budget Setting Report, robust plans are in place to identify options and implement actions to address the future estimated financial challenge. This includes: -

- Ongoing Service Review Programme which includes several fundamental restructuring reviews, process redesign (aligned to digital transformation and automation), productivity outputs (such as time spent on proactive work) and a review of overtime and agency costs.
- Delivery of financial efficiencies from the investment in technology via the Council's Digital Transformation Strategy Programme
- Consideration of asset rationalisation potential or alternative uses of assets
- Review of fees and charges and income generating opportunities (linked to a refresh of the Commercialisation Strategy which is in progress)
- Review of procurement and contracting arrangements, the use of frameworks and delivery of best value (savings and cost avoidance)
- Review of service delivery models
- Consideration of services which could be scaled back or ceased.
- A line-by-line review of all the Council's budgets and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) assumptions.

The Council also acknowledges the ongoing need to improve data management and will be focussed on finalising the development of specialist capacity as a central resource for data management, to build an enhanced performance and data insight service.

4. Intended Measurement of the Plan

The Corporate Plan clearly identifies the outcomes and outputs sought against each Corporate Priority. These are built into our performance framework and performance scorecards to facilitate regular monitoring.

A more robust, specific focus is now being placed on continually improving the Council's approach to performance and improvement in line with the updated best value guidance and introduction of Oflog. We have recently built a 'Knowledge Hub' dashboard of data and data analysis using powerbi, which is accessible across the organisation and is used to inform performance discussions at monthly Service Performance Boards, assessment of delivery of the Corporate Plan and Service Plans and benchmarking against other local authorities (we have replicated and improved upon the Oflog Data Explorer).

The Knowledge Hub also incorporates dashboards for place level data and other key datasets such as Education and Skills, Economic Growth, visitor footfall insights and the resident survey. The data is updated frequently through API integrations with key data sources such as LGInform and Nomis. We are ambitious in our ongoing development of our datasets within the hub and continue to embed this new approach to data sharing to inform strategy and policy and decision making, whilst also driving our improvement journey towards excellence.

5. Barriers to delivery

The most significant central barrier to local productivity is single-year finance settlements from Government. Without a clear indication about funding for multiple years, councils cannot effectively plan and deploy their resources. We are concerned that, once implemented, Local Government Funding Reform will see a redistribution of resources to address the national social care pressure in both Adults' and Children's services and as District Councils do not provide these services, District Councils' resources could be expected to reduce. This would be a shortsighted approach and would fail to recognise the significant pressures already on District Council budgets and the excellent preventative and early intervention work that District Councils carry out.

We have also been hampered by the tendency of Whitehall to design and decide policy that affects councils without engaging the sector as fully and as early as it could. This has resulted in initiatives and funds that are more complicated than necessary and that are difficult and, in some cases costly, for councils to implement. We strongly support much closer policy co-design between central government and local councils. For example – ongoing funding uncertainty around Simpler Recycling. We are significantly impacted by tight timescales to apply for grant funding and then the unrealistic time to expend the funding.

We incur unnecessary spending and waste valuable officer time complying with rules, requirements, restrictions, and processes imposed by central government and regulators. These include:

- 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.
- The wide range of separate one-off revenue and capital grant pots with onerous, costly and counter-productive bidding processes.
- Complicated, inconsistent, and misaligned processes for submitting data returns to central government.
- Lack of join-up between central government departments on issues including housing, homelessness prevention and asylum dispersal.
- Numerous statutory requirements to place notices in newspapers or issue written copies of routine notices.
- Excessive amount of information that is required in annual accounts or has to be published under the transparency code.
- Statutory overrides such as the requirement to value assets for accounts every year.
- Regulatory bodies seeking “to the letter” compliance with their statutory codes.

Having a skilled workforce is key to delivery. We continue to experience significant difficulties in the recruitment of staff with key skills particularly at senior levels. We have now invested in 3 National Graduate positions and have engaged LGA Workforce Planning support. However, shortages of key skills in the market, and the impact of nationally agreed pay awards which are eroding the pay structure of more senior roles, result in ongoing recruitment difficulties and necessitate the use of very costly agency staff and/or payment of overtime to bridge the gap.

The market for local government off the shelf systems and solutions is also extremely limited resulting in procurement issues, increased costs particularly if moving to cloud, supplier relationship issues and unwillingness to offer open integrations to improve data connectivity across the architecture.

At local level, the Council also has a strong understanding of our communities, and any specific areas of regional inequality and need for levelling up within the new East Midlands County Combined Authority region that relate to Ashfield. We would value greater recognition of district level understanding of our communities and their needs and more opportunity to influence, be involved, and inform local decision making and the required building blocks for change.