

East Herts District Council Productivity Plan

May 2024

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

East Herts Council has a comprehensive transformation programme in place. This has been running since 2022 and sets out an aspiration to save at least £1m from a budget gap of £2.6m over four years. The vision is that '*East Herts Council will be a customer focused, financially sustainable, effective organisation with flexible, empowered employees*' and this will be delivered through three strands:

- Be agile, focusing on developing a flexible workforce through ensuring the right skills, culture and ways of working are in place across the organisation
- Be digital, focusing on improving the customer experience and meeting customer expectations through technology, systems and processes
- Be commercial, focusing on achieving a sustainable budget through income generation

Each strand has a variety of projects underpinning it and is led by a member of the Council's leadership team with representatives from various services. Delivery of the overall transformation programme is also a key part of the Corporate Plan, which was adopted by Council in early 2024.

Successful projects to date include the implementation of a new CRM system for customer services, rationalising our office footprint to create space for commercial tenants (now let) and generating income from assets including our parks and open spaces. Savings to date are in excess of £300,000 and success is measured through metrics such as telephony answer rates (which have improved by 20% since the CRM was launched) and the proportion of face-to-face visits which have dropped by 10% in favour of online and digital contacts.

As the transformation programme continues we intend to focus on increasing productivity further through projects such as upgrading our payment system to enable more flexible ways of taking money, removing the staff intranet by making better use of existing systems for information sharing and collaboration and creating a corporate support hub which brings all business support staff, workflows and systems into one place to serve the whole organisation. This will ensure we continue to create savings and improve the user experience whilst increasing productivity.

In addition, we are currently working with the LGA using their Decision Making Accountability model which will review our current management structures and ensure they are fit for purpose whilst generating a revenue saving of around £500,000.

Our technology platform is key to realising many of our transformation objectives. East Herts shares IT services with Stevenage Borough Council and last year commissioned SOCITM to review and recommend how best to maximise convergence and rationalisation of infrastructure and applications. Both council's IT provision is now focused on app/ software development, cyber security and supporting transformation.

2. 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

As one of the busiest districts in the country in terms of planning we are focusing on using technology to improve both the user experience and improving internal processes. Thanks to being awarded government grants, we plan to undertake a Digital Maturity Self-Assessment and then develop an action plan. This will enable the planning application process to be more effective for residents, speeding up the time for validation and determination. Additionally, the council will pilot the government's connectivity assessment tool, developed by the Department for Transport, in order to better understand the sustainability and accessibility of sites proposed for development.

Likewise, the implementation of our CRM is leading to improved insight regarding our most vulnerable customers, how often they contact us and how to respond to their specific needs leading to changes in how we manage customer services resources. We also make regular use of feedback through our website (govmetric and google analytics) and social media to improve and target content to relevant audiences.

We are presently working on a new data strategy and exploring how we can improve it. Our objective is to enhance the quality and availability of the data we collect so that we can use it to inform our decisions and improve our services. We are also

looking for ways to make our data more accessible and transparent to residents and other stakeholders.

We are having difficulty merging multiple data sets from different legacy systems due to the lack of support for reporting systems like Power BI. Our biggest challenge is that these systems are not integrated with one another and have limited reporting capabilities. As a result, we are unable to use tools such as Power BI to create more insightful and interactive reports and dashboards.

In line with our new data strategy, we are planning to share more data with other organisations in a more efficient manner. To achieve this, we intend to start using common platforms and standards for sharing data, thereby enabling us to combine and analyse data from different sources. This, in turn, will help us gain a more comprehensive understanding of our operations and performance.

We are currently investigating how the Microsoft suite of data tools can assist us in enhancing our workflows and systems. We are exploring the possibility of leveraging new technologies like predictive analytics and AI to achieve this objective. Our focus is on understanding how Microsoft's data tools suite can support us in achieving our goals.

3. Plans to reduce wasteful spend within the organisation and systems

All staff have a responsibility to identify waste and inefficiency in the organisation. This is supported by the Transformation Team which is composed of project managers and business analysts who lead on scoping and developing businesses cases for improving productivity, project management, implementation and benefits realisation. Moreover, we have invested in Lean Six Sigma training for staff across different service areas so they are able to assist with the implementation of change and understanding the nature of demand.

Operational progress is monitored through the three strands referred to above. Strand leads in turn report into the Transformation Board who monitor overall progress towards strategic goals and objectives. The Deputy Chief Executive is the overall sponsor for the transformation programme and budget reports and updates go to the Audit and Governance Committee before ultimately going to Executive,

ensuring political and officer accountability for transformation throughout the organisation.

The council has a variety of shared service arrangements in place with adjacent councils which leads to increased efficiency and productivity. As well as the shared IT service referenced above, we also have a shared Revenues and Benefits Service with Stevenage Borough Council and a shared waste management contract with North Herts Council. There are also other forms of shared arrangements with multiple authorities for investigating fraud and auditing as well as trading arrangements for Building Control and CCTV. We also have shared staff with different authorities in service areas such as economic development and project management. Shared services and other forms of collaboration are considered on a case-by-case basis depending on the level of benefits that can be realised.

4. Barriers preventing progress that Government can help reduce or remove

The Council's productivity is impacted by market forces in many ways. For example, pressures on the labour market for key sectors such as planning, environmental health and legal mean we struggle to fill many posts. These can often be covered by agency staff or consultants however at a much higher cost and with associated higher turnover leading to loss of corporate knowledge and reduced productivity.

Our productivity is severely impacted by short term financial settlements from government. Moving to a three-year financial settlement would enable the Council to plan for the longer term and enable strategic decision making. Likewise we welcome the recent changes to allow an increase in planning fees however the flexibility to set local fees and charges across all services (eg. Licencing) is also a barrier preventing more strategic decision making.