



# South Staffordshire Productivity Plan 2024





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

### **Budget Planning - a continuous process**

The council has adopted a rolling Resource Planning and Prioritisation programme (RPP) to maintain ongoing focus and monitoring from June each year for the forthcoming MTFS period. This is where the resources and spending of the authority are consistently reviewed to ensure that they continue to contribute towards the priorities of the Council Plan. If this is not the case, then resources are re-allocated as necessary. As part of this, the productivity of each service area is under regular review and the council is confident that productivity is maximised. Significant savings would only be possible by reducing or stopping services completely.

### **A commercial, risk-assessed focus with local businesses in mind**

A key focus of the MTFS has been the maximisation from our asset base, both financially and for the benefits of the local community. For example, the development of the Community Hub (the Council's main office building) has not only enhanced the value of the asset, but also generated a significant income stream to support the local authority (£604k PA).

The council owns a significant commercial property portfolio, which have been acquired and maintained in a measured approach, this has allowed the council to invest in the district and stimulate economic growth, in support of our communities. In recent years, we have also undertaken development projects on either undeveloped land on our Enterprise Parks, or as redevelopment opportunities. Our existing portfolio generally caters for the SME sector in small, light, industrial-type units - which are in very high demand and have very low void levels.

In 2021, the council completed an expansion to its Four Ashes Enterprise Park, creating 18 new small business units with a £5.4m investment. All units were let within four to five months, generating circa £80k per annum plus wider benefits to the local economy. Also, in 2021 we completed a £1.45m extension to our largest single unit on the same industrial estate to enable our existing tenants to expand their business whilst also generating additional income for the council.

Another ambitious development project is the partial redevelopment of Wombourne Enterprise Park which is currently in progress. Following a full options appraisal of the site, the council opted for a retail-led development, investing £7.6m in the demolition and redevelopment of the site. This included securing Lidl as an anchor tenant with an additional one to four retail units and a small commercial block. It will support job creation, economic wellbeing for residents, and the financial resilience of the local authority.



## Capital Investment

The Council has made use of capital resources to invest in several areas. Most recently, this has been in our shared use leisure centres to increase membership since the pandemic (and maintain at these increased levels, and to continue to purchase) and to purchase commercial premises to increase rental income whilst providing economic regeneration opportunities.

The Council ensures that capital resources are used to constantly improve our commercial premises so that we are a 'landlord of choice'. We also seek to identify other commercial opportunities where possible, ensuring that these are always robustly assessed, and risk is minimised in line with CIPFA/government guidance.

## Evolution not revolution

To give clarity of direction, for staff and our service teams we have an 'Evolution' programme. This programme sets out 'how, what and when.' with the focus being to build on what we have, not necessarily introducing new initiatives. Whilst we are a good council, as acknowledged by our recent peer review, we seek to do things even better and importantly shape and design our services through the lens of our communities.

We have developed our Evolution programme around four key strands:

- Ways of Working
- Focused delivery areas
- Data and intelligence
- Place Partnership

As part of our Evolution programme, we are constantly looking to develop and improve our internal processes working together with members, staff and our communities for example:

- Project management disciplines and governance have been embedded into the council's approach for delivering transformation resulting in the delivery of a significant customer experience programme and ensuring that resources are shifted appropriately.
- We have enhanced our existing integrated performance management arrangements with the development of new community outcome focused performance indicators and insight data.
- Our existing workforce appraisal model (My Review) ensures that individual staff objectives are aligned with Council Plan, Performance Targets and Priorities
- We have revised our corporate service standards to ensure we offer and are able to measure a high level of customer service.
- Corporate pinch points have been mapped across council priorities to ensure we can proactively forecast and address capacity issues to avoid or mitigate against service delivery risks.



- We have continued to invest in service areas.
- We have reviewed and updated our risk management approach with a direct link to our integrated performance management arrangements.
- Our organisational development activities have been refreshed to ensure they are fit for purpose in leading and performance managing hybrid teams.
- Measurement of our performance is undertaken through resident surveys, staff engagement surveys, organisational peer reviews and a range of corporate and service plan targets, metrics, and indicators. As part of our governance and management arrangements these are regularly reported to Corporate Leadership Team, Senior Project Boards, Member Committees and Scrutiny as appropriate.

We have maintained our investment into training and development. We work closely with our regional employer West Midlands Employers who commission recruitment, organisational development and training for the sector. This ensures that procurement is cost effective and duplication is avoided.

We will soon be launching Part 2 of the 'Evolution' programme to staff which will set the direction for the next 12 months, aligned to the new Council Plan.

## 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.

### 'Digital by choice'

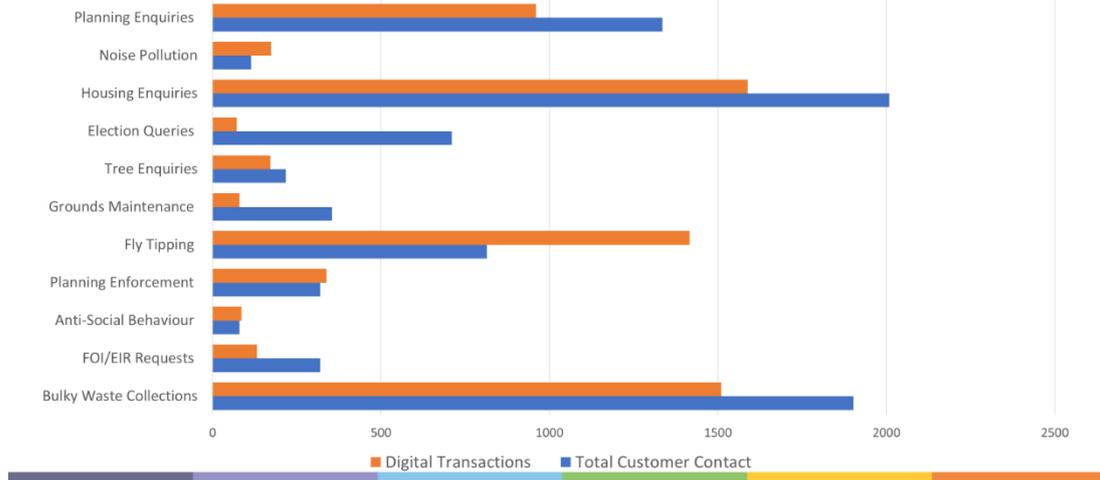
Digital by choice has been the transformation focus for the last 12 to 18 months. At its most simple this is about resident channel shift to digital or online services because the online services are more convenient, easy to use and are effective. Enabling residents to access council services digitally has reduced telephony and face-to-face demand for a number of services.

An end-to-end customer journey approach has been taken to designing and delivering digital customer journeys:

- A new council website has been created, designed around mobile usage.
- The number of webpages have been reduced from over 5,000 to less than 500
- New search capability and navigation has been added making it easier for residents to find the information on the website.
- Resident digital journeys have been mapped, challenged, processes redesigned, and online forms created to mirror the desired digital journeys.
- Website content has been refined to assist with signposting residents to the relevant online forms.
- Resident feedback is captured, reviewed weekly and improvements made to digital journeys. This ensures a constantly improved customer experience.



## Digital by choice...



- Digital dashboards have been created to provide insights into customer online activity. Where available, data from traditional contact channels has been augmented with customer online activity to provide greater insight of digital by choice channel shift.



Transformation of end-to-end customer digital journeys has seen a shift of demand away from customer services staff. This has enabled these customer services staff to respond to other demands in a timelier fashion and this has been evidenced through a reduction in telephone wait times.

The transformation focus for the next two years will be to reduce the back-office demand further through the use of automation and artificial intelligence. Robotic Process Automation (RPA), Artificial Intelligence and Bots will be added to the council’s existing digital technology stack to further enable automation opportunities.

Measures of progress and success will be evident through the digital by choice channel shift index with a continued increase in digital service adoption by residents but also an overall

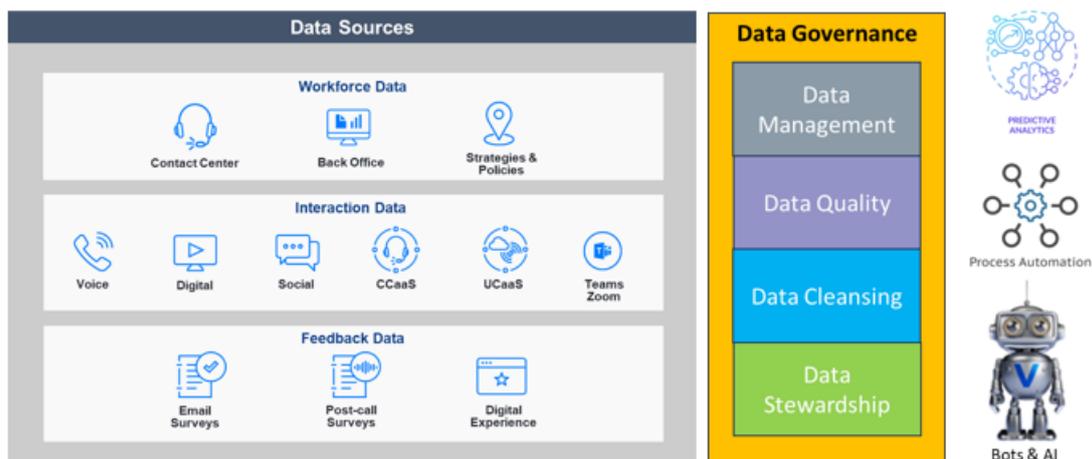


reduction in customer contact being dealt with by customer services staff and back-office teams.

## Next steps - Data and Artificial Intelligence

The next phase of transformation will build on the solid foundations of 'digital by choice' and will focus on ensuring data quality and data management is at the heart of service and process improvements:

- Consistent high-quality data will be required to feed predictive analytics, automation and Bots
- Cleansing of data to achieve a suitable standard, followed by constant monitoring to ensure data quality is maintained
- Bots and automation will perform simple, repetitive tasks saving staff time



Predictive analytics will be used to analyse existing digital dashboards and customer contact data, looking for correlations and trends. This information will be used to predict potential future demand. Artificial intelligence will interpret the demand and initiate appropriate actions such as sending emails, social media posts or starting processes. Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Bots will support the automation of some of the initiated processes.

## How this will be used going forward - Waste Services as an example

Predictive analytics analyses when customers are likely to sign-up online to garden waste collections. Artificial Intelligence uses this information to form social media posts, marketing emails etc. sending them at times when historically residents are likely to be online. Artificial Intelligence monitors and reviews the impact, making changes to the content of the social media and email posts and/or change the time the communications are sent. Traditionally the Waste service team would have done this.



### 3. Your Plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and system

We continually review and monitor budgets through our internal mechanisms this is supported by a number of measures including the statement from our Auditors:

#### **External Audit VFM Opinion**

Grant Thornton provided the following Value for Money judgements as part of their 2022/23 audit:

**Financial Sustainability** – *Arrangements in respect of financial planning, budget setting and control are all sound. We have no recommendations to make.*

**Governance** – *Overall the Council has sound arrangements in place but there is scope to further enhance risk management reporting. In response to this, the Council has commissioned a review of its Risk Management processes resulting in an updated Risk Management Strategy and new Risk Registers to move forward with.*

**Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness** – *Overall the Council has sound arrangements in place, but we have made one improvement recommendation as there is scope for the Council to obtain more robust assurance over the accuracy of non-financial information. In response to this, the Council has undertaken a fundamental review of its Integrated Performance Management processes.*

#### **Low spend on temporary staff**

The budgeted percentage spend on agency for 2024/25 was 1.89%. Generally, spend on consultants is only approved where there is insufficient expertise within the Council and a business case can explain the benefits that will be realised from the additional cost. Agency staff are only employed where there have been a number of attempts to recruit permanently, and the post is required to be filled to complete priority work.

#### **Accountability of Spend**

There are various governance routes for accountability of spend. The Finance team monitors budgets monthly, and this is reported to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) quarterly. Following this, the monitoring information is reported to Cabinet and is also included in the Integrated Performance Management that is presented to Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Individual meetings are also held between Cabinet Members, Assistant Directors and the Finance Team to discuss their own areas in more detail.

There is a Capital Working Group that meets quarterly to oversee capital spend and this is also reported as part of quarterly monitoring. Challenge Boards (made up of CLT and the relevant Assistant Director(s)) are also in place to focus on high priority areas within the



Council (e.g. Climate Change and Transformation) and any significant budget requirements/spend are reported to these.

Should there be any concerns about the overall budget or any specific budget areas, the report to CLT and Cabinet would increase as necessary. CLT meet on a weekly basis and any issues are reported as and when they occur rather than waiting until the next round of reporting.

The launch of our last Council Plan 2020/24 coincided with the onset of the pandemic but this did not affect our commitment to delivering our objectives. Across the period of this Council Plan, we have consistently managed to deliver all council services within the annual budget. We recently launched our new Council Plan 2024/28 with four priorities, one being Financial Stability to ensure we continue to do the same moving forward.

#### 4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.

Key financial risks include:

**Fairer Funding Review:** The future of the system of local government finance continues to remain uncertain. – multi use settlement.

**Unnecessary bureaucracy** – reducing competitive bidding

**Quick policy decision** – eg the future of or continuity of the UKSPF

**More flexibility for devolved funding**

**Business Rates Retention and New Homes Bonus:** For a number of years, the government has been talking about the need for Local Government Funding Reform and a Business Rates Reset. The future of the New Homes Bonus has also been unclear. Both of these comprise a large proportion of the Council's funding. Along with several one-year financial settlements, this has created uncertainty and made it difficult to produce a robust MTFS without making significant assumptions.

Further legislative change and the potential impact on the council is uncertain, such as:

Policy and Legislation:

- There are a series of new policies which have arisen from the Government's Resources and Waste Strategy, which we need to consider in shaping the future delivery of our waste collection services.
- Increasing pressures around housing, homelessness and the use of Temporary Accommodation, and the financial implications for the council.