

Productivity Plan

Introduction

North West Leicestershire is a semi-rural district with a population of approximately 104,705. Most people live in the district's two main towns - around 37,800 in Coalville and 15,100 in Ashby de la Zouch.

North West Leicestershire is one of the fastest growing economies in the East Midlands and sits at the axis of the Midlands, strategically located 25 miles from Birmingham, Derby, Leicester and Nottingham and at the centre of the national transport network. As of 2018, 52 of the top 200 Leicester and Leicestershire businesses are based in North West Leicestershire representing variety of sectors.

Investment has continued at key sites supporting the local logistics sector, including alongside the A42 at Appleby Magna in the south west of our district and around J24 of the M1 motorway to the north.

Parts of our district around East Midlands Airport have been included within the East Midlands Freeport. This designation is expected to attract additional employers to our doorstep but may also create land use pressures for the council to resolve.

During 2022/23 we worked with the LGA to develop a clear narrative for our organisation. This has informed the development of the Council Delivery Plan with high levels of inward investment, low unemployment and significant housing growth.

We have a sound financial position as a direct result of this growth, but we recognise the challenges that local government faces with the uncertainty over future financing, in particular the business rates reset scheduled for 2026/27 and we are responding to these through our transformation programme and governance processes.

Our organisation has changed significantly over the last two years. We've completely changed the way we work and now fully embrace hybrid working, using our modern offices in Coalville as a space to collaborate and our central Customer Centre to support those people who need us most.

There is a renewed focus on our customers and a robust assessment of our financial sustainability and governance.

We recognise the importance of working collaboratively and using our unique position within the region to influence the wider economic landscape, and we have led the work to develop the Strategic Growth Plan for Leicestershire. Our challenge is to manage growth; balancing the needs of our communities and enabling the strategic infrastructure required to support the necessary growth.

We know we have a challenging agenda for improvement and have focused on key priorities in our Council Delivery Plan, supporting regeneration through our priority for Coalville and our emerging regeneration framework for the whole district.

We recognise the importance of a collaborative approach in tackling some of the key challenges within North West Leicestershire and in positioning ourselves around the right tables to influence wider regional and national agendas.

The plan will be evaluated against a set of performance indicators and targets on a quarterly basis, as part of the council's performance management framework.

Transforming services

NWLDC has been actively pursuing a range of strategies to enhance productivity and service delivery in recent years. Our approach has been multifaceted, focusing on staffing, structural adjustments and the implementation of new operating models.

We have taken on a significant transformation in the design and delivery of our services to optimise how we use resources. This transformation has been driven by a need to adapt to the changing needs of the community and the evolving expectations and demands on council services.

Our channel shift journey has been led by two fundamental drivers. The first is simplicity - it needs to be as easy as possible for residents to do what they want online. The second driver is availability of services - so our website must be easily accessible whilst simple and intuitive to use.

Our journey was accelerated by Covid and the need for residents to access online services to transact with us. This, along with our two main drivers, has meant that we have transitioned our high-volume, low complexity processes to digital forms, which are fully integrated to our back-office systems and have no requirement for a 'middle office' touch.

Examples of these are missed bins, requests for new waste containers, garden waste, bulky household waste collections and online payments. The statistics around these processes show that 65% of residents choose to carry out these transactions themselves instead of contacting the council.

We have in the last two years been working to bring some of the more complex service requests online, and there is a clear desire amongst our teams to embrace channel shift using digital forms to enhance the customer experience.

This has primarily been our Licensing, Environmental Protection, Environmental Health and Health and Wellbeing teams. These processes have full integration into our back-office systems and have removed double keying by officers, saving time and ultimately meaning the resident has a quicker resolution to their transaction.

In the last year our Customer Services team has moved into a town centre location, away from where the council's back-office services are located, to be more accessible to residents.

We offer a self-service area where those residents who want to self-serve can do so. The area is also used for the Customer Services team to educate and demonstrate to those who want to try to self-serve, so they can access our services in this way in the future. Those residents who wish to interact with our team face to face can still do so at their convenience and we have seen an increase in people who come to see us face to face, mainly with complex needs, due to the more accessible location of our team.

Our model is digital by choice and convenience, as we recognise that residents often just want to do what is convenient for them at that point in time that they need to access our services.

Staffing and structural changes

We have made significant changes to our staffing and structures to improve productivity. A key component of this transformation has been the restructuring of the Senior Management Team, which is responsible for overseeing the council's various departments and services.

The restructuring aimed to create greater synergy between services and ensure that the council structure is fit for purpose in the current landscape. Moreover, we have adopted a more flexible

working model, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a review of occupation levels.

Measuring productivity

Productivity within the council is measured through performance against the Council Delivery Plan, which outlines our priorities and objectives.

Performance is reported to Cabinet four times a year, ensuring transparency and accountability. Customer service standards are also continuously reviewed to identify areas for improvement.

We continue to use the feedback we receive from complaints to generate ideas for service improvements, both in the short and long term. We work hard to view complaints we receive as a positive opportunity whilst remaining focused on trying to resolve them to the satisfaction of residents as quickly as it can.

Service improvements

We have implemented various service improvements, such as the introduction of an Housing Improvement Board to oversee changes in process, new IT systems and engagement with tenants to enhance the management of council housing repairs. Additionally, planned improvements in council homes, including kitchen and bathroom replacements, have been carried out through annual capital upgrade programs.

Transformation plans

NWLDC laid out a Local Plan for 2011-2031, which provides current planning policies for the district and outlines a strategy for delivering homes, jobs, and infrastructure. The Strategic Growth Plan, prepared by partner organisations in Leicester and Leicestershire, sets a long-term vision to address challenges and opportunities up to 2050.

In addition, we have developed a transformation programme which is designed to enhance our performance, efficiency, and effectiveness. This may entail reengineering processes, systems, and structures, in addition to transforming the workforce's culture, behaviour and skills.

The council has agreed to commit £500,000 to its delivery. A number of key projects are underway, including waste and parking reviews.

Potential for savings

In terms of services with the greatest potential for savings, we have identified areas that will save money in the longer term, such as the demolition of former Council Offices to remove maintenance costs and free up land for sale, earmarking funds for future projects.

Despite being consistently one of the highest recycling performers in the county as recently recognised by Oflog, costs of our waste management service are higher than our nearest neighbours, so we are currently conducting a comprehensive review of this service.

This evaluation is underway, and we expect to identify and implement considerable cost-saving measures. The objective is to enhance efficiency and sustainability, while also reducing expenses. By scrutinising current practices and exploring innovative solutions, we aim to optimise waste services for the benefit of the community and the environment. The anticipated financial benefits from this review are significant, reflecting the council's commitment to fiscal responsibility and environmental stewardship.

Capital spending impact

Capital spending plays a crucial role in transforming services and unlocking new opportunities.

We have invested in new contracts to speed up repairs and developed policies to address issues like damp and mould in council housing.

Significant investment has also been made in the district, including £7.9 million to invest in Coalville regeneration projects over five years, as well as £3.7 million in council-owned land to support regeneration and bring employment to the district. NWLDC has been awarded £1.3 million in government grants for regeneration projects in the district.

Preventative approaches

We have undertaken preventative approaches, particularly around homelessness and rough sleeping, with strategies in place from 2019 to 2024 to address these issues. Efforts include revised housing allocations, engaging young people, and fast-tracked money advice services.

Locally-led reforms

Locally-led reforms are essential for delivering high-quality public services. We have engaged in partnership working arrangements, such as the Growth Collaboration Agreement with Leicestershire County Council, to ensure the successful delivery of infrastructure and services required to support growth.

At the Heart of the National Forest, our partnership with the National Forest Company has been key to the development of a masterplan for the area.

We also have strong links with key businesses e.g. Donington Race Track, home to the Download festival, attracting 75,000 visitors to the district every year. And we have positive relationships with our parish and town councils, tenants and our wider customer base whose feedback is key to assist us in delivering the priorities for the district.

Technology and data

We recognise the challenges posed by legacy systems, which can impede the seamless flow of information. To address this, we're exploring strategies that include system integration and the adoption of cloud-based solutions, facilitating better data management and sharing capabilities and this is outlined in our ICT Strategy and Roadmap.

Collaboration with other organisations is a regular practice as highlighted above, allowing us to enrich our services and decision-making processes. This synergy is not only beneficial but essential in crafting policies that reflect the needs and aspirations of our residents.

We use our Performance Management Framework to make sure the priorities set out in the Council Delivery Plan are directly linked with our service performance. We continually monitor our performance against these priorities, allowing us to celebrate achievement, seek out any challenges and retain our focus.

Our adopted Customer Experience Strategy (2022) sets the context for our customer approach. The strategy places customers at the heart of our organisation and seeks to modernise and improve our approach to customer service through investing in material, human and technological resources in response to the rapidly changing customer expectation.

We are poised to initiate a comprehensive evaluation of our customer engagement strategies, acknowledging the significance of diverse communication channels. In this process, we will conduct a thorough analysis of our website content to ensure it aligns with our commitment to excellence in customer service.

We acknowledge the significant role artificial intelligence (AI) can play in enhancing the efficiency of local government operations, especially in the realm of customer service. We will explore its possibilities as part of our Transformation journey.

In April 2023, we made a significant technological advancement by implementing a new financial system known as Unit4. This move positioned the NWLDC as one of the pioneers in adopting a cloud-based version of this financial system.

Despite facing initial challenges, which are common with the adoption of new technologies, this strategic decision is aimed at revolutionising its financial reporting capabilities. As we continue to refine this financial reporting processes, the potential benefits include improved budget management, increased fiscal accountability, and the ability to leverage financial data for strategic planning. With these planned enhancements we are well-positioned to meet the evolving financial management needs of our stakeholders.

Reducing wasteful spend

Achieving financial sustainability is a complex endeavour, particularly in the context of local government budgeting. The 2024/25 budget setting process appears to have been a pivotal moment, with significant progress made in bridging the funding gap. This achievement involved a meticulous examination of expenditures, ensuring that each penny spent contributes to the overarching goal of efficiency and fiscal prudence.

This approach to budget housekeeping—scrutinising costs, enhancing efficiency, and carefully considering revenue adjustments—lays the groundwork for a robust financial strategy. It is a strategy that not only addresses immediate fiscal challenges but also sets a precedent for long-term financial health. By taking these steps, we are demonstrating a commitment to responsible stewardship of public funds, which is essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring the delivery of vital services.

Moreover, the focus on budget housekeeping can lead to innovative practices that further streamline operations and reduce waste. It encourages a culture of continuous improvement, where every aspect of the council's operations is regularly evaluated for potential enhancements. This can lead to more effective service delivery, better resource allocation and ultimately, a stronger financial footing for the council.

Invest to save

Invest-to-save initiatives have been a part of our approach to financial management. For example, the council has allocated funds for projects that promise long-term savings, such as reimagining our member and officer accommodation leading to the planned demolition of former Council Offices to eliminate maintenance costs and generate revenue from the sale of the land. These measures not only save money in the long run but also contribute to the council's sustainability goals.

The move to more efficient eco-friendly office accommodation and created a modern Customer Centre, which has brought services closer to the community and benefited local businesses who co-locate with us at our new office base.

Staffing

Regarding staff budget allocation, we are mindful of the costs associated with agency and consultancy spend.

The Council is committed to ensuring value for money. We assess the effectiveness of agency and consultancy spend by reviewing the impact and outcomes of the services provided. Plans to reduce use and costs include scrutinising long-term engagements and exploring alternatives that may offer better value or efficiency.

We are constantly reviewing our recruitment advertising strategies. The Indeed platform is used to provide national coverage and the Ashby and Coalville Nub news local websites are used for all vacancies. Specialist journals and their associated websites are also used depending on the role. For example, when seeking roles at Corporate Leadership Team level, we will often use the Local Government Chronicle or other specialist professional journals. LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media, and Forces families' jobs are also used.

The Human Resources team works closely with the Communications team to further improve job advertisements and approaches including wider use of social media options. The use of social media and methods / approaches to ensure our job roles appeal to the younger generations when seeking to fill roles are also being reviewed.

Our recruitment processes have been reviewed to try to make the process easier for potential applicants by accepting CVs and a reduced application form. This is to try to make the application process more customer friendly, particularly for roles where applicants may have low levels of literacy. In areas of high-volume regular recruitment, managers have been encouraged to have 'rolling' adverts.

The costs associated with equality, diversion and inclusion and trade union facility time are negligible.

Governance of spending

To ensure accountability of spend, we have established governance structures that include a senior management team, consisting of Head of Paid Services, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer, and a detailed Constitution outlining the responsibilities and procedures for financial decision-making.

These structures are designed to maintain transparency and accountability in all financial activities. We have strengthened our capital governance structures recently and have recently been recognised as an exemplar by the Local Government Association for our governance arrangements.

By effectively overseeing investment arrangements, the Capital Strategy Group can ensure that funds are allocated in a manner that maximises returns or minimises costs. The recent grant funding for swimming pools means photovoltaic (PV) panels can be installed at one of our swimming pools. These panels not only reduce energy costs but also align with environmental sustainability goals.

Barriers and challenges

NWLDC is currently grappling with two predominant issues: the unpredictability of funding and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, with the latter adversely affecting all service areas within the organisation. It is imperative for the Government to pledge sustained financial support over multiple years, which will grant us the stability needed for more effective service planning in the foreseeable future.

The ongoing struggle with recruitment and retention remains a significant hurdle. Despite the implementation of various strategies to mitigate these issues, our teams are operating under considerable strain, which compromises both the capacity and resilience of our service delivery.

District councils have seen their spending power significantly reduced in recent years. Despite significant pressures on services such as housing and homelessness we have not benefited directly from uplifts in 2019/20 and 2020/21 that upper and single-tier authorities received for social care for example.

Whilst specific grants to deal with the above pressures are welcome, the current preference for allocating funding to upper-tier authorities first, necessitates that district councils engage in a bidding

process to secure necessary funds, which can be a complex and competitive process. Further direct receipt of funding could potentially streamline the allocation process, allowing for more efficient and targeted use of resources at the district level.

In addition, it would also be helpful if Government was to engage directly with district councils in discussions regarding the devolution of powers, with their associated funding streams, given the track record we have in delivery and in shaping places.

In summary, overcoming productivity barriers within NWLDC requires a combination of financial support, regulatory reform, market collaboration, and internal cultural shifts. With these elements in place, we can strive towards delivering services more effectively and meeting the evolving needs of the community it serves¹.

¹ For detailed information on our performance and strategic planning, the Council Delivery Plan and performance reports to the council's Cabinet can be referenced.