Halton Borough Council
Productivity Plan – June 2024

This plan has been developed and submitted to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in line with the requirements set out by the Minister for Local Government in his letter to the Council's Chief Executive, dated 16th April 2024.

For ease, the plan aligns with the four areas of focus set out by the Minister.

1. Transformation of service design and delivery to make better use of resources:

The Council, with its partners, has implemented several notable changes to the way services are delivered within the community to better effect, focusing on efficiency of delivery and generating system wide improvement across community services.

The parameters set by the Minister for the production of this plan document do not allow the space for detail to be included, however the Council would be happy to elaborate and provide more detail on the examples given below to colleagues in DLUHC, as required;

- Halton Intermediate Care and Frailty Service (HICaFS) - launched in December 2021 to replace services that were previously provided separately. A single point of access with a coordinated response, jointly funded by the Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside through the Better Care Fund, delivered in partnership by the Council, Warrington & Halton Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Bridgewater Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.
- Family Hubs - Halton was selected as a pilot LA by DfE and DHSC and since December 2022 has been developing the principles of the Family Hub Model, with partners, to focus on the key areas of parenting, infant feeding, speech and language, inclusive services for young people 11+, and digital 24/7 access to support independent self-support.

Notwithstanding examples such as those above, significant challenges prevail around maintaining and improving productivity against a backdrop of reduced resources and increasing demand. The Council agreed in 2022 to adopt a three-year approach to setting a balanced budget on the basis that:

- All of the 'easier' revenue budget savings had been taken in previous years.
- Reducing expenditure to the levels necessary to balance the budget would require substantial changes to the way the Council delivers services.
- Children's Services needed time and support to improve.
- Over previous years, the Council had removed much of the capacity required to change the organisation in a sufficient timescale, to deliver a balanced budget.
- Change on the scale required would need significant investigation, consultation, culture and organisational change in order to be deliverable and sustainable. This could only be achieved in the medium term.

The Council implemented a three-year Transformation Programme in April 2023, designed across key themes, to promote a shift in the way in which services operate to meet demand and support the community, whilst at the same time achieving commensurate savings targets as part of the Council's MTFS. The programme places additional capacity at the centre of the organisation and is funded via a Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy (*for fuller background and detail, refer to report to Executive Board and Council, March 2023:*

2. Plans to take advantage of technology to make better use of data to improve decision making, service design, and use of resources:

The Council has a history of using technology to enable productivity across the organisation. During 2019 the Council adopted agile working principles across many services, underpinned by a capable and flexible IT infrastructure that was designed and managed in house. At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council maintained productivity at optimum levels seamlessly as the technology platform in deployment already enabled remote working on a large scale. This enabled a productive ongoing response to community need as the country moved through the pandemic period.

The Council has robust plans in this regard and recently has responded to shifting global technologies and as part of its approach to transformation is adopting the Microsoft 365 operating model as a default platform, to enable remote working and collaboration in a flexible but secure environment.

Within the Transformation Programme work is currently ongoing to examine, change and develop the way in which currently available technology can promote more productive customer access to service areas and key systems, both from within the community and inside the organisation itself. This will include the application of AI.

At the present time, the Council is working collaboratively with the Hartree Centre (https://www.hartree.stfc.ac.uk), based within the Borough, to develop a secure and robust approach to capturing and managing service data to enable performance assessment, productivity planning, and demand forecasting.

3. Plans to reduce wasteful spend within the organisations and systems:

The Council has a strong track record of robust financial planning and management, evidenced by the annual audit of its accounts by Grant Thornton and that, up until 2016/17, overall spending had been managed within budget every year. However, like all local authorities it has since had to manage within significant financial constraints.

The Council actively promotes the avoidance of wasteful spend across organisational systems. This is managed through a robust regime of financial monitoring and management at officer and Member level, promoting accountability across organisational systems. This is open to public scrutiny through the publication of reports on Executive Board and Council agenda.

Halton has been one of the worst affected local authorities, with its core spending power since 2010/11 having only increased in cash terms by £6.5m (4.2%) compared to the England average increase of 15.7%. In real terms Halton has seen a reduction of £52.4m (25.9%) compared to the national average reduction of 18.1%. Against this backdrop there exists a focus on achieving value for money and return on investment in the organisational psyche.

The letter setting out the expected considerations to be included in this section of the plan cites a number of spend elements on which the Minister applies some focus. The Council's position in respect of these is set out in the following paragraphs.

EDI training and resources – the Council incurs nominal spend in this area, employing a 0.5 FTE Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Officer to cover the whole of the organisation. The primary focus is on ensuring that the Council necessarily complies with the legislative duties incumbent upon it through the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Agency Spend – the issues around agency worker spend in LA's (and other public bodies) are well rehearsed. The Council has been forced to spend more than is desirable on agency resource in recent years, following a shift in the characteristics of the labour market, escalating demand in social care (Adults and Children's), and the 'overheating' of the agency worker market. In 2023/24 spend was 15.06% of the total staff budget.

As part of its Transformation Programme, the Council is actively reducing spend in this area and to ensure ongoing VfM is in the process of moving to an alternative delivery model for contingent labour, implementing a public-to-public joint venture partnership which will launch in September 2024.

Consultancy Spend – against a backdrop of avoiding wasteful spend and not permanently employing resources that it does not consistently need, the Council finds periodically a need to use consultancy to apply skill and expertise to projects or initiatives for which there is no in-house skill. In the last financial year consultancy has been used to bring technical / professional skill into a range of areas, and has specifically been used to implement the Transformation Programme, an approach that will remain in this area for the foreseeable future at a moderate level. In 2023/24 spend was 2.24% of the total staff budget.

Trade-Union facilities time – in accordance with the Trade Union (Facility Time Publication Requirements) Regulations 2017, the Council has been required to submit metrics to the Cabinet Office demonstrating proportionate spend on facilities time for several years. It has consistently complied with that requirement. The data is available in lines 741 and 742 of the dataset held on the government website at this location: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/665ef37d16cf36f4d63ebdb5/Facility-Time-22_23-Dataset.xlsx

4. Barriers preventing progress that government can help reduce or remove:

There are a number of barriers that currently impede the Council in effectively planning its finances, which is consequential on its ability to plan for optimum productivity in the development and delivery of services to its community. Please refer to the key points outlined below;

Barriers related to Local government funding:

- Single-year settlements
- Real-terms funding cuts
- Late announcement of finance settlements
- Fragmented funding for local authorities
- Competitive bidding for funding pots
- Delays in the Fair Funding Review
- Inadequate funding provided with the devolution of powers
- Council tax referendum limits
- Fixed price grants that don't allow for inflationary impacts
- Inequity and conflict around health funding to LA's and health partners

Barriers associated with Government reporting regimes:

- Extensive monitoring required by Government departments for some funding through reporting, Boards and administration
- Guidance on Government Policy /S chemes often appearing months after announcements, so activity can't commence and productive time is wasted estimating the impacts / approach

- Multiple ways in which Government collect monitoring information, i.e. via Microsoft Forms for UKSPF, via Delta for most other things, via Excel spreadsheet for Levelling Up Funds
- Producing productivity plans

Barriers related to non-productive application of resources to Council activity:

- Limits on Councils ability to change some discounts for Council Tax, leading to time spent on regular checks of eligibility
- Abuse of the Freedom of Information Act (including Subject Access Requests) by some organisations resulting in significant unnecessary work on often non-sensical requests
- The need to continue producing paper Council Tax bills, Planning notices etc rather than just online versions
- The continuing requirement to hold all Council meetings in-person and to not allow some Council meetings to be held online

Barriers to effective delivery of Social Care services:

- Uncertainty over the future of the adult social care precept and restricting it for use on adults' social care only
- Pressures around capacity and demand from acute hospitals
- Inadequate funding and resource for preventative measures
- Workforce shortages and difficulty recruiting and replacing workers
- Shortage of foster carers in children's social care resulting in costly residential provision
- Cost of residential placement for looked after children

Summary

The Council takes seriously the need to deliver the best quality services that it can within and across its community. In 2023, the Council extensively consulted its community on the development of new Corporate Plan, resulting in new priorities against which it will deliver the Corporate Plan 2024-29 (https://www3.halton.gov.uk/Pages/councildemocracy/corporate-strategy.aspx)

The Council will focus its resources over the coming years towards delivering those priorities productively and efficiently. It is within that context that the successes, current initiatives to maintain and improve productivity, and the challenges outlined above are being planned for.

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Halton Borough Council, June 2024