Productivity Plan

Rushmoor Borough Council – July 2024

Background

The Council has had a strong focus on transformation and continuous improvement in recent years. It has successfully delivered a funded transformation programme and several savings programmes. It regularly welcomes advice, challenge, and guidance through the Local Government Association's Peer Challenges, with the most recent conducted in June 2024.

The need for a clearer, focused and more strategic direction on transformation and service improvement is recognised and is being considered by the new administration. This needs to be informed by and complement the Council's Financial Resilience Plan. It is recognised that several levers can be pulled to assist in developing an effective and modern Council and there is an expectation that the priorities and outcomes set out in a refreshed Council Plan should drive any transformation of the Council's operating model.

Introduction

The Council has a [Customer, Digital, and Technology Plan](#) which was approved by its Cabinet on the 6 June 2023. This describes how it aims to become a modern, customer-focused organisation with accessible, efficient, and cost-effective services. It provides the foundations for a future longer term and comprehensive strategy for 2024 onwards that will be developed in conjunction with a new Council Plan.

The Council publishes on its website a [roadmap](#) of transformation projects including recent achievements, current activity, and future plans. It also shares [case studies and documentation](#) on past projects to help other Councils and public sector organisations learn from and reuse our work.

This productivity plan summarises the Council's history and plans to:

- Design and deliver services to make better use of resources.
- Use technology and data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources.
- Reduce wasteful spend.

It also describes the barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.

Design and deliver services to make better use of resources

In October 2019, the Council agreed the mandate for a transformation programme known as ICE. This built upon the Council's previous transformation activity and was focused on:

- Moving to a more customer centric approach
- Reducing the ongoing cost of services in a sustainable way
- Creating some financial headroom to help balance the Council's budget and deliver different or better outcomes in line with the 3-year business plan.

The ICE programme had objectives agreed by a Task and Finish Group and further background about the programme can be found in the [November 2022 Cabinet report](#).

At the formal conclusion of the ICE programme, the Council then focussed its transformation resource on supporting delivery of the Council's savings programme. The [Council's Customer, Digital, and Technology Plan](#) sets out the current strategic intention and short-term plan.

In the future, the Council will establish a clearer, more focused, and more strategic approach for transformation and service improvement and this will be linked to the priorities set out in a new Council Plan and support the requirements of the Financial Resilience Plan.

The Council follows these principles when designing services:

- To focus officer time on activity where it is most needed.
- That most people will access most services using our website.
- Where they cannot or will not use the website, then people can contact us by phone or email.
- In-person contract is avoided unless essential to deliver the service.
- That manual information processing is minimised in favour of automated processing.
- That postal notifications are minimised in favour of email notifications.

To achieve these principles, the Council is introducing digital services to our high demand services to increase efficiency, reduce customer services workload, and improve customer experience.

This involves creating integrated customer experience following best practices, such as:

- high quality, accessible forms using adapted GOV.UK Design System
- integrated payments using GOV.UK Pay
- automatic notifications using GOV.UK Notify
- Integrated with back-office systems to provide fast or instant response and automated information processing.

The Council has also undertaken service redesign to tackle convoluted processes, moving from post to email notifications, better use of technology to automate information processing, and improving advice and guidance available on its website.

To date, the Council has completed work with:

- [Recycling and rubbish](#)
- [Elections](#)
- Housing
- Environmental health: noise and bonfires services

The recycling and rubbish digital service has transformed how people contact the Council about this service. Service demand handled over phone and email with Customer Services has decreased by over 10% since the introduction of the digital service.

The Council offers high performing digital services. In 2023/24, 74% of interactions with a digital service took place online with a 90% four- or five-star satisfaction rating.

The main focus of this work is now on the council tax function, starting with council tax billing and moving home services. The Council is also investigating how it can improve its allotments, markets, and abandoned vehicles services, as well as a review of its freedom of information request service.

The Council has made some progress, with the support of the Local Digital Fund, on a ['manage my taxi licence'](#) digital service.

The Council recognises that organisational culture, learning and development, recruitment, and retention make an essential contribution towards improving council productivity. Its People Strategy aims to achieve four outcomes:

- A positive culture enabling high performance.
- People developed to realise their potential.
- The Council is an employer of choice.
- Engaged people feeling valued and supported.

To achieve these outcomes, the Council is:

- Embedding the Council values and behaviours (Brave, Collaborate, Innovate, and Integrity)
- Recognising team and staff performance
- Identifying learning and development needs through a Development Review process
- Producing an annual corporate learning and development plan with management development, staff awareness workshops, lunch 'n' learns, e-learning, and multiple external development opportunities.
- Developing employees to create more succession pipelines.
- Maximising use of the apprenticeship levy (76% since April 2017) for new apprentices and existing staff
- Using health and wellbeing surveys to understand how to improve the working environment.
- Publishing a health and wellbeing statement to describe how the Council will develop a healthier, happier, more resilient, and productive workforce.

Using technology and data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

Since 2019, the Council's working practices have been transformed. A workforce that predominantly worked from the office using desktop computers running legacy operating systems and office software; has now adopted a hybrid working style, using laptop computers with up-to-date operating systems, and cloud-hosted document storage and office software. Council back-office software is being moved incrementally to cloud hosted alternatives.

In January 2020, the Council launched a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system for Customer Services – the first to be fully established at the Council. This has transformed the Council's ability to understand and respond to customer contact. For the first time, the Council has had access to real-time, comprehensive performance data to make informed decisions about its services.

The Council makes decisions using performance data, user research, consultations and feedback.

The Council's Performance Management Framework was adopted in April 2020 and refreshed in June 2023. It sets out the approach to managing, monitoring, reviewing, and reporting Council performance. The latest performance monitoring report was published in June 2024.

The Council has invested in a range of traditional, digital, and social media channels to enable regular contact, engagement, and consultation with its key stakeholder groups, including customer feedback surveys, workshops, consultation items on the Council's website and regular citizen consultation on both borough-wide and place-specific issues.

Transformation projects use performance data, demand data, user research and customer feedback to frame and understand problems to determine the focus of service redesign.

The Council recognises it could do more to provide information to residents, stakeholders, managers, senior leaders, and councillors. Collating and presenting data is a manual, time consuming activity that could be automated to free up time for more analysis and insight. Existing data products need to be reviewed to better align the measures to the outcomes we want to achieve. The administrative burden of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests could be reduced by publishing more data and automating the publishing of data.

Plans to reduce expenditure

The Council has a good recent history of achieving budget reductions. In 2022/23, the MTFS included £1.825m of previously agreed savings in 2023/24 rising to £3.241m in 2026/27. However, given the forecast budget gap this was insufficient and additional savings were required to balance the budget.

In November 2022, the Cabinet agreed to an Outcome Based Budgeting exercise, which aimed to identify further changes and projects to ensure that net costs were brought down, whilst ensuring that the Council's aims continued to be fulfilled.

The work identified a significant number of options which were validated, reviewed by the Cabinet and Council who agreed to a set of proposals for incorporation in the 2023/24 budget. The total value of these proposals was £2,290,934 of which 97% were delivered.

The Council's financial position continues to be challenging and the need to address this as a matter of urgency is understood. The Council agreed to a Financial Resilience Plan in February 2024. Given the recent history of budget reductions, there is limited opportunity to find significant additional savings without fundamental changes such as defining a new operating model and reprioritisation of services. The Council intends to develop options to address the long-term cost of services through a future transformation strategy.

Barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.

The most significant central barrier to local productivity is single-year finance settlements. Without a clear indication about funding for multiple years, councils cannot effectively plan and deploy their resources.

The Council has 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.

The Council would also benefit from much greater flexibility to decide how to raise and spend money locally. Central prescription and ringfencing constrain the ability to allocate resources effectively.

The Council incurs 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.

The Government can help the Council accelerate how it uses technology and data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources through:

- Changes to legislation in elections, benefits, and planning to enable greater use of digital services and reduce the use of post notifications.
- Reopening Local Digital Fund continuous funding to allow the 'manage my taxi licence' project to continue to beta stage.
- Reopening the GDS Academy to build a solid foundation of technical, design, change and data skills across the public sector.
- Building on the successful local government adoption of GOV.UK Pay and GOV.UK Notify, open up GDS Platform tools GOV.UK Forms and GOV.UK Sign In to local government.
- Continuing the Future Councils programme to resolve the common systemic problems and barriers across local government.
- Committing to resolving market failure local government software sector by combatting the poor outcomes, excessive cost, and monopolistic attitudes of the existing big suppliers.