



Eastbourne Borough Council

Productivity Plan

Introduction

1. Eastbourne Borough Council has a population of 102,744 and covers an area of 292 km sq. The town of Eastbourne is a tourist resort on the Sussex coast, approximately halfway between Brighton and Hastings, and is one of the fastest growing seaside towns in the UK.

Section 1: Transforming the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources.

2. The borough has a strong track record in transforming its services, most notably developing shared services with Lewes District Council since 2015. All services are now jointly managed by one staff body servicing both councils.
3. Between 2015 and 2019 the Joint Transformation Programme (JTP) delivered a new operating model for the council aligning systems and processes across the two councils wherever possible. As a result of that work savings of £2.7m were achieved. JTP brought benefits that were not just financial. As a result of the shared service arrangement; economies of scale were achieved avoiding single points of failure, there was a pooling of specialist knowledge for example tourism skills from EBC benefitting LDC and the councils were able to share best practice, for example over the covid response, economic regeneration skills and income generation.
4. Following that, in light of the challenges created by the Covid pandemic, a further savings programme called Recovery and Reset (R&R) was established in 2020. This identified where further efficiencies could be achieved across the five pillars of Best Use of Digital Technology, Service Reshaping, Best Use of Assets, Restart (post covid recovery) and Workplace 21 (reducing future staff workspace requirements). This work has continued right up to the current time, both through the progression of R&R to Recovery and Stabilisation, and then to Stability and Growth (S&G), and also within the mainstreamed annual business and financial planning cycle, through which we monitor our productivity.
5. Because the ongoing efficiency plans have been in existence for a number of years now, the scope for making additional efficiency savings is becoming less. Much of the "low hanging fruit" has already been tackled and we are having to be increasingly innovative in our approach to savings delivery. This is also hampered by pressures that councils are facing in certain areas of service delivery (for example emergency and temporary accommodation) and without additional support in these areas, the focus for savings and efficiencies will increasingly focus on reduction of discretionary services that are still vital to the local economy.
6. The council has been subject to Exceptional Financial Support from government but, despite needing this assistance, has been successful in its transformational work to achieve savings. Significant achievements through our savings programmes, amounting to savings of £6.109m in all, have included;

- Creation of our neighbourhood first team to be a 'one stop' front line service for council operations (e.g. parks inspections, planning site visits, housing checks etc).
 - Alignment of IT systems across the two councils (see next section for more details).
 - Transfer of our outsourced waste contract to a local authority controlled company (South East Environmental Services Ltd) and a move to fortnightly collections.
 - Increased biodiversity in our parks and open spaces, in line with sustainability targets, but also achieving in-contract savings.
 - Restructuring of our front-line services to increase efficiency whilst avoiding any service reductions.
 - Disposal and/or leasing of assets which are surplus to requirements, do not add value or are not in line with corporate priorities e.g. a golf course, a pub, various other commercial properties with limited income potential.
 - Introduction of and/or increases in charging for discretionary services to ensure they are proportionate and comparable with other providers.
 - Developed, through our Digital Transformation Programme (see more in section 2 below), an approach to deploying new and emerging technologies to improve customer services and to deliver organisational efficiencies.
7. There has been a particular focus in the past year on training and skills development around financial management and productivity. All budget managers are receiving refresher training on good budget management practice, to ensure a central focus on tight budgetary control is maintained. Alongside this, our long-standing commitment to strong performance management ensures that we retain a good understanding of the council's financial and service performance across all areas of the council's business, at all times.
8. As is set out in the next section of this report, we consider our focus on technology is likely to bring the most benefits in terms of future productivity gains, alongside the work mentioned above in maintaining tight budgetary controls on spending.

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

9. The council has a longstanding Digital Transformation Programme (which forms part of the Stability and Growth Programme) to take advantage of advances in technology and make better use of decision making and service design. This programme is delivered by a dedicated Business Transformation Unit that combines project managers and service design business analysts to work with staff across the councils to ensure customers can better access services, quicker cheaper and on their terms.
10. Key projects have included replacing and updating legacy systems to streamline service delivery processes, consolidate and improve data quality, enabling customers to better self-serve online and free up staff to help customers most in need. Associated examples include having implemented a new Revenues and Benefits system and a new Environmental Health and Licensing System will go live this summer.
11. Our customer contact and engagement has been enhanced by our Chatbot project. Customers make use of the Chatbot on the Councils' website and on the phonelines to access service information. The data collected through the Chatbot interaction enables us to refine and continuously improve our service offer to customers. The Chatbot deflects demand and frees up staff to deal with more complex customer inquiries or alternative value-added activity.

12. The programme also includes a project delivering Intelligent Automation. So far, we have made use of Bot technology to support verification of earnings and pensions and direct earnings attachments to support delivery of our revenues and benefits service, saving time and freeing up staff. The project is considering how our Chatbot can be further enhanced to do more for customers. It is also gathering insight to support the redesign of a range of business processes that will help the councils benefit financially and future proof services for our customers.
13. Robust governance arrangements for the programme are in place to track programme delivery as part of the councils' Stability and Growth portfolio. A cross section of senior staff sit on associated boards, ensuring delivery to time, cost and quality and that councillors, staff, partners and customers are engaged accordingly.
14. A key part of the programme is system alignment between LDC and EBC. Examples include a new single Revenues and Benefits system, shortly a new Environmental Health and Licensing system and, a new Planning system (among others) in the delivery pipeline. These new single systems streamline data collection within one place rather than across two, enabling a single view of associated customer data. They simplify collation and management of customer data and associated service delivery processes for our staff, and increasingly enable our customers to input and update their own data. Our customers can self-serve for council tax through our new system and this will also be rolled out for benefits services soon. This helps improve data quality as customers have visibility over the data they give us, complementing our GDPR requirements and reducing the margin for error where staff do not need to interpret and input on behalf of the customer. These coincide with our wider plans to streamline points of access for our customers where this meets their needs - towards single sign on and self-service in terms of our customers inputting and checking their own data online, in one place, at a time that best suits them.
15. Some of the barriers experienced by the council include legacy systems providers making it difficult to exit from or change existing arrangements. They may do this by charging significant sums to extract data and make such data usable in other systems or, to retain read only access to their legacy systems. Legacy systems can encourage ways of working that may no longer be fit for purpose and limited by the technological envelope in which they were designed and implemented. The councils are exploring potential for Robotic Process Automation to assist with regards to porting and data extraction where relevant and the barriers identified are managed as risks through the councils' digital transformation programme.

Section 3: How we reduce wasteful spend within our organisation and systems.

16. We consider the council to be highly efficient and believe that wherever it is found we have worked hard to eliminate 'gold plating' or wasteful spend. However, we are not complacent about this, and recognise that we need to be continuously mindful of the risks of such issues re-emerging.
17. The Joint Transformation Programme, and subsequent Recovery and Reset work were highly valuable in driving out waste in our processes. The new operating model devised jointly with Lewes District Council drove out waste by restructuring roles away from traditional 'professions' and into more generic functions, where simpler, rules based work could be carried out by generalist staff, leaving more time for specialists to focus on the more complex activities requiring those specialist skills.

18. Much of our IT based work mentioned in section 2 above has used an 'invest to save' approach, where up-front investment in our Business Transformation Unit, has enabled us, in a quick and agile way, respond to developing technological solutions.
19. Our business and financial planning cycle is central to our monitoring and management of efficient spending. Through close working between our performance team and our financial planning team we continually review spend and identify savings opportunities across the organisation. Service managers are held to account for their spend through quarterly budget management, with close, but challenging, relationships with finance business partners playing a key role in ensuring accountability.
20. With regard to EDI, we do not have dedicated staff working on this. Two staff members combine this work with other tasks including community grants, cost of living community support and safeguarding. All training is delivered in house, mostly through our on-line learning platform, so costs are minimised, whilst we do still consider this to be an important part of council work. We are confident that we meet our statutory requirements under the Equality Act, ensuring that all cabinet reports contain proportionate equality and fairness analyses.
21. We are part of the Sussex Training Consortium which enables all councils in Sussex to benefit from high quality but affordable training for staff. This longstanding joint arrangement has proved very beneficial to the council whilst reducing costs in this area.
22. The proportion of our paybill spent on union facility time is very low at 0.00002226% .
23. For 23/24 the proportion of the total salary spend on agency staff was 9.2% (£811,538) and for consultants was 6.4% (£568,462). This will reduce in 24/25. 30% of this cost relates to interim finance staff and seven new permanent members of staff joined in early 2024. 19% relates to Tourism & Culture and Consultancy for both creating a Local Authority Controlled Company and transferring functions to the private sector to reduce costs. 22% relates to Planning and costs relating to the Local Plan which has a reduced budget in 2024/25. 28% relates to Green Waste temporary admin staff and additional staffing requirements relating to the implementation of a new Revenues & Benefits system. The overall percentage spend for Eastbourne is expected to be significantly reduced in 2024/25. Most of these appointments were temporary, in year appointments, so have not lasted for over 1 year.

Section 4: The barriers preventing progress that the government can help to reduce or remove.

24. EBC has worked closely with East Sussex County Council, and the other districts and boroughs in East Sussex to agree a shared list of barriers. The Leaders and Chief Executives of the respective councils have agreed a short list of collective lobbying priorities to be used whenever a collective or bilateral opportunity is available. This list covers; financial barriers, national policy and legislative barriers, barriers to taking a more preventative approach and capacity barriers. A full list of these is appended to this document.
25. In addition, and specific to EBC, the increased focus on localism, with the trust given alongside it, is a very welcomed direction, as has been experienced with our sister council LDC, who has recently been given Pathfinder status for its work in Newhaven. We would

like to see a similar approach developed for EBC, where we are currently very constrained by central government controls, such as in relation to the Treasury and Homes England, for example. Greater autonomy on decision-making for local authorities, alongside less silo working by government departments, would significantly increase our ability to make our limited resources go further to benefit local people.

26. We would also very much welcome a review of some policy directions which impact on all councils' abilities to deliver services. In particular, the policy of lifetime secured housing creates a real challenge for councils to be able to deliver those in housing need. This in turn places real pressure financially on us to work within our budgetary constraints.

27. Dependency on other government bodies can also impact on our ability to operate autonomously and in the best interests of local people. For example, dependency of the Environment Agency for the seafront investment, on Arts Council England for tourism and on the Sports Council on leisure. Direct funding for such activities would provide the council with more freedom and flexibility to use this money to best effect for local people, whereas current approaches create additional, and unnecessary, layers of administration and bureaucracy. The need to bid for funds, rather than receive adequate core funding, also creates a 'bidding industry' in local government which does not add any value for local communities and detracts from the delivery of real local change and improvement.

Performance measures

28. The key performance measures used by EBC on a quarterly basis are set out below;

Performance indicator	Target for 2023/24	Performance in 2023/24
Percentage of Council Tax collected during the year	96.80%	95.82%
Percentage of Business Rates collected during the year	97.00%	97.06%
Average days to process new claims for housing/council tax benefit	22	20
Average days to process change of circumstances (housing/council tax benefit)	6	12
Average time taken to answer calls	Data Only	4m 32s
Average days lost per FTE employee due to sickness	8.00 days	8.11 days
Housing: Rent arrears of current tenants (expressed as a % of rent debit)	4%	4.21%
Housing: Average void relet time key to key (month & YTD)	20.0	35.2
Planning: Increase the percentage of Major Planning Applications processed within 13 weeks	60%	100%
Waste Service: Percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting	45%	38%

Combined Response for East Sussex (County, Districts and Boroughs) regarding the barriers Government can help reduce or remove

There are a range of barriers which prevent the Council being more productive or sustainable which Government could help reduce or remove as set out below. The way in which central Government departments work with local government and local places can be an overarching barrier. The [Partnerships for People and Places programme](#) (in which ESCC participated) recently set out five barriers to place-based working and ways these could be addressed.

Financial barriers

A number of national issues are contributing to the Council's very significant financial challenges and ability to use the resources we have to best effect:

- Funding is not aligned to need – the funding formula on which local authority allocations are based requires fundamental reform to ensure it properly reflects the cost of providing services in different areas. There is currently over-reliance on raising income through Council Tax which is unrelated to need and is particularly difficult in areas like East Sussex where need for services, especially social care, is high but residents' ability to contribute more is very limited.
- Single year financial settlements limit our ability to plan and use resources most effectively – we need longer term settlements, including certainty on Council Tax referendum limits.
- Multiple ringfenced grants, with restrictive criteria and reporting requirements – we need greater freedom to allow local decision making on the best use of funding.
- Bidding processes, multiple funding pots and time-limited funding/pilots – these create additional work, a lack of flexibility to meet local needs and wasted time and resource in standing up/winding down provision or developing unsuccessful bids.
- National reforms which create new duties and responsibilities for the Council but are not fully funded – a key risk relates to Adult Social Care charging reforms which will, if implemented, have a major impact on councils in the south east, including East Sussex, with older populations, high levels of people self-funding their care and additional challenges in the independent sector market.
- A lack of early information on the funding available to meet new duties, and the specific obligations involved, to enable councils to plan effectively – for example in relation to Extended Producer Responsibility (Packaging) reforms

National policy and legislative barriers

There are a significant number of requirements placed on us by national policy and legislation which reduce or remove our ability to target services most effectively and/or use our resources most effectively. Key areas in need of national reform or review include:

- Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) – wholesale reform of the SEND system is required and funding must either be increased to meet eligibility criteria or eligibility criteria reduced to match available funding.
- Home to school transport – reforms to entitlement to make it more proportionate and affordable.
- Concessionary fares – reform to enable targeting of free travel to those most in need.
- The residential placements market and the agency staffing market in Children's Social Care - both require greater controls on the costs charged and the profits made by independent sector providers, and how these services are made available.
- Looked After Children (LAC) Reviews – a review and reduction in the number of professionals required to attend LAC reviews so we can make local decisions about the best use of limited staff time.
- Utility company street works – greater powers for local authorities to manage the activities of utility companies on the highway which will enable better co-ordination of works and a reduction in inadequate repairs.
- Migration – a joined up, place based approach from Government is required to address inconsistencies and a lack of co-ordination across multiple national schemes which play out locally in ways that create additional issues and work.

- Virtual (formal) meetings – legislative change to provide for local choice over which meetings may be held virtually in order to make best use of time, maximise accessibility and minimise travel costs and associated carbon emissions.

Barriers to taking a more preventative approach

Providing early, upstream support can lead to better outcomes for people and reduce the higher intensity demand placed on a range of public sector organisations. We also want to invest in more cost-effective, proactive approaches to areas like maintaining our roads. **We need Government to recognise the evidence-based case for prevention**, including:

- Providing significant additional investment in early help and family help as recommended by the MacAlister review of children’s social care.
- Providing additional investment so we can provide better support for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and those at risk of exclusion, in mainstream schools.
- Investing in health improvement and services that can maintain people’s independence through Adult Social Care, Public Health and the NHS.
- Funding changes to allow more proactive planned roads maintenance, which would help us spend less on reactive repairs including pothole filling and the associated costs and work generated from roads being less well maintained.
- Greater investment in local economic growth and skills development, with increased local flexibility to meet local needs, which would increase independence and reduce need for support through access to good jobs.
- Housing – a strategic approach to addressing rising homelessness and the systemic and structural problems in the housing market, particularly in high cost areas such as the south east, which have a knock-on effect on demand for public services.

Capacity barriers

We need Government recognition and support in the following areas:

- Workforce – we continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining the essential staff we need. This is particularly the case in skilled areas such as social work, legal services or property services, and in areas where pay levels compare less favourably to other sectors. In social care, the impact of recent visa changes on overseas workers is also contributing to high vacancy rates.
- Ability to invest in technology – the significant financial pressures we face limit our capacity to invest in new technology and developing or recruiting staff with the specialist skills required.
- Capacity to further develop/improve services – the steps taken over many years to manage with reduced resources means that our managers and staff are stretched fulfilling their core roles. This means there is very limited capacity to implement significant change programmes. This is particularly the case in support services which have been reduced more significantly in order to prioritise funding for frontline services.
- Data sharing – improved data sharing by Government departments such as DWP to enable more automated processing in areas such as blue badges.