

Productivity Plan for Castle Point Borough Council – June 2024

Castle Point is changing.

Our organisation is transforming, undertaking a root and branch review to create a modern, cost-effective and productive organisation.

Making best use of our resources

A 2022 Local Government Association (LGA) Decision Making Accountability report backed this need for transformation, noting that the council is ready for change and ‘would like to be more proactive’, and is moving in a new direction away from its traditional, siloed approach. Reflecting on the need for change, it noted a hierarchical culture, lack of confidence and a lack of transparency and fairness regarding roles and pay, a fragmented leadership team and frontline and a lack of cohesive working at leadership level.

To address this, 2023 saw a complete review and restructure of our second and third officer tiers, delivering savings of £779,000 p.a. and in 2024 we have completed the process of job evaluations across the organisation, ensuring we are paying the right salary for the right roles. Service reviews are now being undertaken across the breadth of the organisation to ensure maximum productivity, promote working across organisational boundaries, taking a “digital first” approach to service delivery and effective delivery and value for money. These will be completed in 2024 and are expected to deliver a 10% saving within three years whilst meeting standard design principles and modernising services through transformation and short-term invest to save initiatives.

An LGA health check in January 2024 lauded significant progress in transforming the council in to a modern, resident-focused organisation, and described it as ‘a completely different organisation from just a year ago’. A full LGA peer review is scheduled for Autumn 2024 and will focus on the standard core components, including capacity for improvement as well as providing a view on service reviews which are currently underway.

Productivity is measured through a number of measures and is regularly reviewed to identify opportunities for improvement and or efficiencies. One example is a current project to assess opportunities for channel shift and improvements to customer journey within our Contact Centre which will result in increased productivity without impacting negatively on our residents. A planned implementation of a customer relationship management system and new website has great potential to deliver productivity gains, currently estimated at £450k per year (a mix of cashable and non-cashable efficiencies through removing vacant posts, cost avoidance and more efficient working practices).

Transformation in the coming years will be driven by service reviews currently in formation and the effects of these will be monitored through a series of measures, including staff numbers, salary budgets, overall expenditure and resident satisfaction.

We expect capital to play a significant role in transforming services and unlocking new opportunities and have already invested in leisure and a local retail centre in order to deliver income, regeneration and help our residents lead more active lives. A strategic asset review is now underway, looking at opportunities for acquisition and development as well as disposal. Plans to purchase additional housing are in development and the £20 million towns fund award to Canvey Island will revitalise and rebuild the town centre.

Furthermore, capital investment contributes to our preventative work, in terms of provision to support homelessness prevention (especially temporary accommodation which is a significant cost pressure for the council). We have invested in our leisure facilities to improve the physical and mental health and well-being of our residents. Recognising increasing energy costs, we have also invested in the latest technology to be more environmentally sustainable by upgrading our leisure centres with LED technology, pool covers and efficient air handling units. A recent Sport England social impact report assessed that our two leisure centres currently provide over £2 million social value annually, serving nearly 14,000 users, a figure which would increase dramatically if it considered sports clubs as well as individual users.

Identifying opportunities to invest to save is a key requirement in our service reviews and recent investments of £220k to extend a fitness suite at Waterside Farm Leisure Centre in 2021 and £1.4m extending Runnymede Swimming Pool with a new health and fitness extension in 2018 have delivered improved facilities, as well as increased membership and usage by 2,700 members and generating new income of £1m per annum.

The Council is bringing forward an Open Spaces Strategy to ensure that our parks and open spaces receive the investment they need to provide quality open spaces for the benefit of the local community, this strategic approach will ensure existing resources and opportunities to augment this with external funding are maximised

Improving our use of technology and data

Our ongoing service reviews will increase data capability and streamline HR systems to hold workforce data in one place. As well as replacing our website and introducing a CRM to drive improvements, workflows, systems and efficiencies, we will improve our performance reporting, and continue to make information available to residents in council reports.

Initial trials of a chatbot in leisure have proven successful and we will look to see how we can expand the use of this technology. Elsewhere in leisure, a drowning detection system has increased safety for our swimmers and allowed the service to

reduce costs of operation through safely reducing the number of lifeguards required on duty by three full time lifeguards saving over £60,000 per annum.

The council is developing plans, through a digital strategy, to make better use of data from across the organisation – linking data from a range of sources into a central data repository that can then be used to create meaningful reports through platforms such as PowerBI. Once we have improved data capability and our data infrastructure, we will be better placed to explore the potential of predicative analytics, working with the [Essex Centre for Data and Analytics \(ECDA\)](#), drawing on data expertise across Essex County Council, Essex Police and The University of Essex.

The Council is currently reviewing options for its Waste and Recycling Service as we seek to modernise our systems and processes. As part of this the Council is exploring how better use of data and technology can provide the information the Council needs to support residents in increasing recycling rates and deliver a more efficient service.

As is the case with many local authorities, the council operates using a number of legacy IT systems. Where opportunities exist, the council is exploring alternatives to legacy IT systems and entering into joint procurement with others.

Reducing unnecessary spend

A key aim for our service reviews is to identify and remove any unnecessary spend. We have recently moved to all out elections and will continue to implement further changes as we identify them. This progress will be monitored through our established financial monitoring process and will be increased by the planned introduction of financial business partners as part of the Financial and Procurement service review, which will also bring in a Procurement Manager to supplement the support that the council receives from EPH, a partnership between the council and Braintree and Epping Forest councils.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is very important in our organisation because we recognise that our workforce should represent the diverse community that we provide services to. We consider it to be fundamental to our work in ensuring we serve our diverse communities. At present we do not have any EDI champions or spend anything on EDI training, beyond e-learning undertaken as part of onboarding. We should look to do more in this important area, including EDI considerations within all workstreams through comprehensive equality impact assessments, whilst ensuring that any investment in training delivers value for money.

Our recent senior leadership restructure, the ongoing service reviews, as well as the completion of job evaluation will all help ensure our use of agency staff and consultants is at the right level, and only used where a short-term requirement arises, or a need for specialist resource, or to cover a hard to fill post. This is benchmarked against the wider market and compared to the cost of direct employment. At present 12.6% of staffing spend is spent on agency and consultancy staff and we plan to ensure agency and consultant spend is minimised moving

forward. This will be through centralising the procurement of agency staff through a framework to provide greater oversight and control and review of our market supplement policy to ensure we pay at the right rates and can reduce agency spend. Less than 0.01% of our payroll is spent on trade union facility time.

Our constitution sets out our legal governance structures, including Cabinet's responsibilities and our scheme of delegations. Financial regulations and contract procedure rules ensure accountability of spend. Office functions including payroll, recruitment, procurement, audit, insurance counter fraud and emergency planning are shared with other councils. These arrangements are incredibly useful and increase access to specialist skills within larger teams which a smaller organisation like Castle Point would not have in isolation.

Addressing barriers to progress

Within Castle Point Borough Council, Legacy IT systems and a lack of corporate workflow have been identified as barriers to progress which we need to address. A lack of digitisation of records leads to manual, less effective and more costly processes. In order to address these issues, the organisation needs to acquire or develop skills in process improvement and digital. These barriers, which apply across multiple services, need investment in IT and new skills to address, which in turn might face a challenge if the employee value proposition is not significantly attractive. On this point, the council would ask that central government, working through the Local Government Association, does more to promote the importance of the work of local government such as supporting central government to deliver on its manifesto promises, as well as making a real difference to local areas and the lives of people who live work and visit places across the country. The service reviews are building in capability and capacity across these areas as they are seen as crucial to supporting the council's journey towards excellent customer service through the most cost-effective channels.

Central government could support this work through capacity funding for the digitisation of records and service delivery, nationally aggregated procurement, providing a longer-term financial settlement, further supporting the work of local government and choosing to allocate funding rather than require a bidding process. Flexibility of funding streams across sectors (i.e. to make it easier to pool funding from across local government, health etc) would allow for partners to ensure that funding flows to where it is needed and not just where it can be spent because of tight restrictions and ring-fencing

In conclusion, local government cannot be expected to deliver ever more with ever less funding. The council has already started on its transformation journey, making significant improvements in a short period of time. The council asks that government helps to create the right conditions for local government to flourish, working together with the sector and not against us (the Towns Fund investment is a great example of central and local government working together) so that we can improve local places and the lives of people in those places.