

Sevenoaks District Council Productivity Plan 2024

This report sets out Sevenoaks District Council's response to the government's request for a productivity plan in line with the letter and guidance to council Chief Executives from Simon Hoare, Minister for Local Government, dated 16 April 2024.

1. How we have transformed the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources.
 - 1.1. Sevenoaks District Council has undergone significant transformation over the past decade. In 2011, with Government seeking to balance its books, we decided that it was no longer wise to rely on central government funding, and declared our ambition to be financially self-sufficient by 2016. Members took (and continue to take) difficult decisions early, we have reduced our staffing, with a focus on back-office or support services and implemented budget savings brought forward by both staff and Members in order to increase our resilience for the future. We have made £8.8m of savings since 2011/12.
 - 1.2. For context, in 2009/10 the Council received £6.3m in revenue support grant (RSG) from the Government; we have received no RSG since April 2018. This demonstrates the extent of the financial challenge the Council has faced to balance its budget, seeking savings and growing its own income to ensure that the scale of grant cuts it has faced have not had a detrimental effect on our productivity and the services we provide.
 - 1.3. Uniquely in local government, we operate a rolling 10 year budget. Although our funding has reduced in real-terms by 40% over the past 10 years, and despite the shocks of Covid and additional pressures on our services, our productivity remains high, and our use of resources in support of this has enabled us to protect the frontline services that our residents value, and to deliver a balanced budget each year.
 - 1.4. Use of resources is crucial but of equal importance, we have developed a unique workplace culture which helps to drive our productivity. Our staff are empowered to innovate, and to identify and take opportunities to improve, supported by a learning and "no blame" culture. Our mantra "the customer is anyone who isn't me" is ingrained in our behaviours and values. We do not outsource any of our services. We believe greater productivity is achieved by investing in our people and providing an environment where they feel motivated and supported to continuously improve.
 - 1.5. This approach was recognised by the council becoming one of the first organisations globally to achieve Investors in People Platinum; we retained this status for a third time in 2023, and have received national recognition from our peers for our achievements (LGC Council of the Year, The Guardian Public Services overall winner, CIPFA Finance Awards overall winner).
 - 1.6. We have continued to refocus and reshape our organisation to protect the quality of the services we deliver. This led us to take steps to generate more of our own income. Members approved the formation of two Council owned trading companies, Quercus 7 and Quercus

Housing, and investing in capital projects that enhance our District and generate returns on our investments.

- 1.7. With government restrictions now in place on how councils can spend in this area, our Property Investment Strategy has been set aside; however, we are now focused on delivering our most ambitious regeneration plans yet in order to stimulate revenue for the council, and protect our services; we have put the skills and resources in place to go forward confidently with this agenda.
- 1.8. We restructured again in 2020, reducing the number of senior managers, re-designing teams alongside this to meet the commitments made by Members through our Council Plan, with wellbeing at its core. We developed our Customer Insights team to gain greater knowledge about our customers' needs so they could have them met with one "visit", focusing initially on two of our busiest teams: housing and planning.
- 1.9. As Covid hit, we shifted quickly to prioritise the needs of our residents and businesses. We were able to achieve this owing to the productive and mutually supportive relationship we have with our many partners and stakeholders in the district, from public sector partners such as the Police and NHS (including the One You public health team) both co-located with us, housing partners, the vibrant community and voluntary sector in the district, Town and Parish councils and not least our own Members who worked tirelessly as community "leads" in their wards during restrictions as part of our "Care for our Community" volunteer-led scheme.
- 1.10. During Covid, we continued to run all of our services, adapting and re-designing them, in particular the weekly waste and recycling rounds, which were collecting a "Christmas week" worth of waste and recycling each week as people remained/worked at home; many continue to do so now.
- 1.11. We have also transformed how we approach community development, through our Better Together community mobilisation programme, giving individuals and communities the tools to make the changes they want to see in their neighbourhoods, and looking at how we engage more effectively with our residents and businesses on regeneration projects.
- 1.12. Our [Community Plan](#) is the shared, long-term, partnership vision for Sevenoaks District developed by the Sevenoaks District Local Strategic Partnership. The overarching priority for the Plan is to increase community participation in the Sevenoaks District as a driver to improving resilience and wellbeing, focusing on those parts of the district with the poorest outcomes. The Plan highlights how adopting a collective approach can help to better achieve the ambitions of the people that live and work in the district.
- 1.13. We were among the first councils to pioneer hybrid working once Covid restrictions were lifted. All staff are required to be in the office for a minimum of 40% of their time, with managers in for 60%, with many choosing to work more frequently in the office. We have monitored the effect of hybrid working, and have seen an increase in productivity since home working began: this is due to an increase in staff wellbeing from an improved work/life balance including a reduction in commuter journeys, and increased abilities to deliver on

more complex or detailed work with fewer distractions at home than in the office.

- 1.14. Since 2019, our productivity has increased by 24%, with 78,000 more units of work produced annually across our services. Hybrid working has also reduced emissions with fewer staff journeys into the office.
- 1.15. Post Covid, like many other councils and others in the public sector, we have seen a marked increase in customer demand. Our Customer Solutions team has seen an increase of 20% in calls to the council; our other teams report similar levels of demand. Not only that, but we have also found that our time is increasingly being taken with customers who present with highly complex issues, especially in housing, many of which are related to poor mental health and who are not receiving or responding to the specialist or preventative support they need.
- 1.16. Our budget setting process for 2024/5 was the most challenging in recent years. The cost of living and energy prices, as well as interest rates, have all impacted on our services. Nonetheless, Members have successfully sought to make savings and looked at where we could do more with less in order to deliver a balanced budget against our 10 year rolling programme.

How we measure productivity in our organisation.

- 1.17. The Council provides approximately 70 services to the 50,000 households and 120,000 people that live in the District. This means that there are a wide range of diverse roles from refuse collectors and vehicle maintenance staff, to customer services, qualified planning and environmental health officers.
- 1.18. Our [Council Plan](#) sets out our Members' commitments to the district across the environment, health and housing, communities, the economy, and the council itself, fiscally sound, focused on the customer, effectively managed and always looking how to improve and innovate.
- 1.19. Productivity is measured by looking at the units of work undertaken across a range of our services, the resources we have to apply to services (staff and budgets) and our performance in relation to this. It is not just about our performance indicators. It is about the best use of all of the information, data, evidence and intelligence available to us to increase our chances of making good decisions for the future of the Council and the District.
- 1.20. We also take into account additional pressures, the most notable one being Covid and its long term effects; climate change and the need to respond to this; the pressures of the cost of living, affordable housing shortages and the various re-settlement schemes for Afghanistan refugees, Syrian refugees and Homes for Ukraine. Despite the pressures on our resources over the last 10 years, performance has remained strong, and our productivity has increased.
- 1.21. We currently have 383 FTE roles in the council; 120 of these roles are our in-house waste and recycling teams. Staff numbers have decreased from 409 in 2019; at the same time

most services have noted an increase of an average of 20% across the board in terms of customer demand. Despite this, since 2019, our productivity has increased by 24%, with 78,000 more units of work produced annually across our services.

- 1.22. We recognise that multiple sources of data exist across our organisation that help us to understand, manage and improve our business. It is our aim to make the most of the information we hold and to ensure that it is properly identified, used, interpreted, analysed and reported regularly in a way that is relevant to the needs of the user.
- 1.23. Our Service Planning process is aligned to the Council priorities and has recently been reviewed in line with our new Council Plan, in time for objectives to be set for the municipal year. Those objectives are shared by the Chief Executive to his Strategic Management Team during their appraisals, and broadened at this stage to include further service specific objectives.
- 1.24. The Strategic Management Team (SMT) further cascade those objectives to their Managers, and where appropriate, the Managers to colleagues in their services. This process allows for clear service objectives to be set, that relate directly to the priorities and objectives given to the Chief Executive.
- 1.25. Once service objectives are set local performance indicators and targets are set out and agreed by Members in their roles as Portfolio Holders. Further management and data indicators are also set out by managers to assist them in the day to day management of their services and to measure the workload pressures on our teams.
- 1.26. Performance information is collated on a monthly basis. The data is held in a performance management software system, which also allows for data calculations and comparisons to be drawn, and leads to monthly performance and productivity reporting to SMT.
- 1.27. A performance report is considered at each meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, who also receive performance data for each Portfolio Holder invited to each of their meetings.
- 1.28. Outside of the performance and productivity data, progress against action plans and objectives arising from our strategies and plans is kept under frequent review and is reported to Members as appropriate.
- 1.29. Resident's surveys are run on our behalf by independent market research companies to ensure a representative sample of residents and that industry standards are adhered to, producing data we can rely on. Our latest Resident Survey took place in 2021 with the following results:

Satisfaction with the way in which Sevenoaks District Council runs things	
Sevenoaks DC 2021	LGA October 2021
81%	56%

Trust in Sevenoaks District Council	
Sevenoaks DC 2021	LGA October 2021
86%	53%

Sevenoaks District Council provides value for money	
Sevenoaks DC 2021	LGA October 2021
63%	43%

Helpfulness of staff (asked of respondents who had contacted the Council in the past 12 months)	
Sevenoaks DC 2021	(No LGA equivalent)
81%	N/a

How well Sevenoaks District Council keeps residents informed about the services and benefits it provides	
Sevenoaks DC 2021	LGA October 2021
82%	57%

Satisfaction with the refuse and recycling service	
Sevenoaks DC 2021	LGA October 2021
91%	75%

- 1.30. The Council prioritises its waste and recycling collections, **all** waste and recycling collected every week. The significant increase in the volume of waste and recycling collected during Covid (similar to a “Christmas week” each week) did not reduce substantially once restrictions ended; parts of the district now have many residents working from home for most of the week.
- 1.31. This has proved challenging for our waste and recycling teams, and has led to a review our collection rounds to make them more efficient, and decisions to no longer provide free black sacks and to replace clear sacks with a recycling bag for life to encourage more recycling. We do not collect glass, and we are also looking at how to implement the requirements around food waste collection. Whilst our rates of recycling are relatively low when compared to others, no waste goes to land-fill. A policy/strategy will be developed for our waste collection services which may identify efficiencies and productivity gains as a result.
- 1.32. Housing and homelessness is another area where recent pressures have impacted on the council’s capacity to meet the significant rise in demand for housing support. The cost of living, high energy prices and the requirement to provide safe and secure homes for approved refugee schemes such as those from Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine have all increased pressure on the rental market.
- 1.33. We do not own our own housing stock, and there is a shortage of affordable rented accommodation in the district – properties in Sevenoaks had an overall average price of

£765,888 over the last year. We have built more than 40, new, affordable homes through Quercus Housing and worked with partners, including West Kent Housing and the charity Hft, to ensure these homes are occupied by local people. We have worked hard to unlock the potential of the private rental sector. Despite this, there is insufficient capacity at present to meet the needs of our customers. Further retrofit schemes could bring forward more homes for rental so that they meet the required standard. Addressing the country's housing need would provide significant efficiencies, financial savings and productivity gains across the public sector.

- 1.34. In 2009 we launched our HERO service, (Housing Energy and Retraining Options) specifically to reduce the use of temporary housing and to prevent homelessness in the district. This is a non-traditional role for a district council; our focus is on clients within the private rental sector, who can receive help and support on fuel bills, debt, rent or mortgage advice, broadband costs, benefits, retraining, skills and employment, and further education options, referrals to other services.
- 1.35. Additionally, we developed the remit of the national One You service to a particular client group, using Better Care Funding. It connected our health and housing work so that we could get to the heart of people's underlying issues - the wider health determinants such as housing, debt, work and family that can cause residents to ask a GP for help - and reduce the pressure on GP resources.
- 1.36. The work focussed on over 55s who have been referred specifically by GPs in two surgeries in the district, who identified their 25 most persistent patients. In most cases, they were not the most physically ill ones but those experiencing mental ill health, loneliness, and depression and debt problems. Most of the time these patients required non-medical solutions, and the Council, in partnership with Age UK, arranged community solutions.
- 1.37. Our other major challenge with housing is the 93% of the district designated Green Belt, which our residents are passionate about preserving, as well as 67% marked as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This limits where development can take place, and in what quantities.
- 1.38. Our investment in capital projects to help meet the District's economic and housing need and provide new affordable homes has preventative effects on the demand for District Council and wider public sector services. Initially funded by a well-managed Property Investment Strategy, with strong oversight from Members, funding sources are now restricted. Greater access to capital funding, overseen by Council's to meet the needs of their local area would allow even further strides to be made.
- 1.39. Capital investment in viable AI projects may also improve public sector efficiency and productivity. Enabling 'invest to save' projects to be delivered with capital and revenue resources to bring in both the technology and skill sets needed could be transformative.
- 1.40. Ensuring that the country builds the homes that it needs, with a focus on affordability and addressing the need for properly funded health and social care budgets would have a substantial, beneficial impact on the public sector, its sustainability, efficiency and

effectiveness.

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

- 2.1. The use of data is integral to the management of our services and is used to information decision making. Service, financial and customer data all combine to give an effective monitoring and reporting system. Report to our Committees are clear and transparent, with additional data published to the Council website.
- 2.2. Where possible, data is shared across organisations and comparisons made to seek to identify and drive improvements. Performance is scrutinized regularly, with Members playing a key role. Our complaints process is openly shared with anyone dissatisfied with the service they receive and we seek to take learning from every complaint, to improve what we do and how we do it.
- 2.4. The benefits of working in partnership with other Council's and local organisations is evaluated regularly. Long-standing partnerships with neighbouring Councils deliver our council tax, business rates, benefits, audit and licensing services with greater efficiency, reduced cost with performance levels maintained.
- 2.5. Decarbonising our assets such as our buildings and fleet would have better outcomes for the district in terms of lower emissions; however the EV option for our fleet is simply not practical for a rural district and would mean multiple returns to re-charge our large vehicles. The cost of these is also prohibitive. The public funding for decarbonising buildings is highly competitive and requires significant match funding which we do not have.

3. Plans to reduce wasteful spend within our organisation and systems.

- 3.1. Reducing unnecessary spend, eliminating waste and seeking more productive ways to work have been embedded over more than a decade of acute financial pressures. Budgets are significantly reduced, some services have stopped, the number of posts has been reduced and every line of spend is open to interrogation through the annual budget setting process. We have made £8.8m of savings since 2011/12.
- 3.2. Budget setting begins no later than September and Members are involved in identifying areas for savings or growth. Once budgets are set they are monitored monthly, reported to Members through each committee cycle, with all variances in excess of £10,000 highlighted and challenged.
- 3.3. Our spend on consultancy (excluding specialist resources for Local Plan and Capital Projects), Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion and other non-service activities are minimal - 4.96% as a proportion of total staff budgets. The Head of HR & OD is the Equalities Champion for the organisation and manages concerns raised by staff as well as supporting managers with recruiting to increase our diversity. We use consultants to support large scale development across the district and these are managed through tightly controlled procurement processes.

- 3.4. Agency staff costs are predominantly borne by our refuse collection services to ensure they operate each and every week day and reduce the need for additional working days and overtime costs. This is monitored by HR, Finance and the Strategic Management Team. No agency staff are appointed for the long-term. The Council's spend on trade union facility time is zero.
- 3.5. The Council's governance is aligned to the Cabinet system, with separate Audit, Governance & Scrutiny Committee's. Decisions are made openly with a framework for services or decisions to be scrutinised, called-in or evaluated by Member-led working groups.
- 3.6. The Customer Insights team focus on identifying and reducing waste on areas with the greatest customer contact. This has led to an increase in "self-service" as many services are now available on line such as reporting fly-tipping or missed waste collections. However, the work being completed could be applied to internal services to drive efficiencies, which may generate further savings. We work closely together across corporate services to ensure we avoid duplication of effort and manage as much as possible across our corporate functions.
- 3.8. We hold regular internal customer satisfaction surveys which can highlight areas for improvement; managers of those teams bring forward an action plan to deliver efficiencies based on feedback from officers.
- 3.9. We share training provision where possible, and have partnerships with other councils to deliver services, and this is also used when training joint teams across the partnerships. Work is underway with the housing provider for Sevenoaks district to deliver joint training to ensure economies of scale and best value.
- 3.10. We have developed and delivered several of our own "peer to peer" training courses to identify and nurture our staff and future managers in order to increase resilience and protect the culture of improvement and innovation. This has saved considerable resources as the training is delivered on site, avoiding travel, and in bite-sized sessions.
- 3.11. Chief Officers undertake thorough budget monitoring on a monthly basis. Supported by service experts (Client Liaison Officers) within the finance team any under or over spends in excess of £10,000 are reported and subject to commentary. Future budget risks are also highlighted each month.
- 3.12. Forecasts are provided for the year-end position from the very first monitoring report each year. There is a collective responsibility adopted for budget management and addressing any overspends. Whilst Chief Officers will seek to address their own challenges if they are able, it is regular practice for the collective to seek solutions to ensure financial year-end is balanced wherever possible.
- 3.13. Each month the budget monitoring position is reported to SMT. Members on the Finance and Investment Advisory Committee receive the most recent budget monitoring reports at each of their meetings, which are then considered by Cabinet. These reports include the commentaries

from Officers on the variance and the more detailed position by service.

- 3.14. The Council has a proud record of reporting relatively small variances against the expected budget position over each of the last 10 years.
 - 3.15. The Council's Scrutiny Committee meets at least four times each year. At each of their meetings Members will ask one or two Portfolio Holders to attend to directly respond to questions about performance in respect of their responsibilities. In addition, it is usual for them to invite senior colleagues from local partners for scrutiny. This has included representatives from Kent Police, Sencio Community Leisure and colleagues from the NHS.
 - 3.16. Furthermore Scrutiny Committee will, from time to time, establish in-depth Scrutiny Working Groups to assess performance and outcomes and make recommendations to Cabinet where they identify opportunities for change and improvement.
 - 3.17. The Council's Audit Committee meets at least four times a year and fulfils its full range of functions in regard to Internal Audit, External Audit, the statement of accounts and the Council's regulatory framework including procurement, risk and raising concerns at work, including anti-fraud and whistleblowing.
 - 3.18. We begin our budget setting process in September each year. Processes are in place to ensure savings ideas can be put forward by Members and be subject to debate and review as the process moves forward. Service Change Impact Assessments are a useful tool which explains clearly the proposals being put forward and the risks that they may present.
 - 3.19. From September onwards, Members on each Advisory Committee will see budget proposals relevant to their responsibilities at least once. Advisory Committees recommend to Cabinet any savings and growth proposals from the service areas within their terms of reference or any amendments to proposals being put before them.
 - 3.20. Between December and January (depending on when the Government confirm our finance settlement) Cabinet will recommend a draft budget to Council. Full Council is responsible for approving the final budget and this takes place in February each year.
 - 3.21. There is strong Member involvement and responsibility for financial decisions that extend to capital schemes. Whilst Council continues to hold responsibility for all major financial decisions, schemes of delegation are used appropriately to ensure the Council is able to act competitively when considering new investment opportunities.
 - 3.22. We do not work with an elected mayor, combined authority, or within a devolution deal.
- 4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.**
- Lack of long-term financial settlements. We have just been through the most challenging

budget setting for several years; it is hard to see how we could improve productivity further without additional resources to invest in staff, to boost growth and services and to deal with increased customer demand

- Many grants and other short term funds are resource intensive for smaller councils to bid for and to manage, and often competitive, meaning the investment in time and skills to compete will not necessarily be rewarded
 - Legislative restrictions or frequent legislative changes that stop progress in its tracks, for example: Councillors prevented from remote attendance at meetings; an inflexible apprenticeship regime that takes money out of local government with an insufficient range of standards and providers to deliver the training that the sector may need
 - Access to capital funding to invest in regeneration and house building; likewise sufficient security and incentive for private sector funding in local capital schemes
 - The limitations imposed by government on investment by councils have impacted our two companies Quercus 7 and Quercus Housing. Our Property Investment Strategy has had to be set aside as a result.
 - The resources required to fuel the central government demand for local government data returns and information
 - Overly-complex rules for local government financial statements which discourage effective scrutiny and drive a failing public sector audit service
 - Uncertainty about local government reform and lack of evidence to support any benefit to residents or the sector that is derived from devolution as opposed to effective and properly resourced District / Borough / Unitary / County Councils
 - Recruitment to key posts and in some teams not being able to compete with private sector or London based salaries – this applies across the board but notably in Planning, Democratic Services, housing.
- Your plans must be returned by 19 July 2024, by email to productivityplans@levellingup.gov.uk.