



Productivity Plan

Productivity in Local Government

In February 2020, the council was able to set a balanced budget for the forthcoming year with financial projections at that time indicating that the council would not be required to make any additional savings across the medium-term planning period to 2028-29. Planned expenditure for the period was able to be met from anticipated income or useable working balances.

In the four years since February 2020, the financial landscape has changed significantly and, along with the rest of the country, the council has faced increasing financial challenges brought about by the longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national fiscal and economic situation, a lack of clarity from central Government around the future funding for local authorities and increasing demand for services.

However, the council has continued to challenge itself and has continued to move forward with an ambitious plan to make Gravesham a great place to live, work and visit through:

Clarity Of Vision

Ensuring a unified vision across all aspects of the council with a new Corporate Plan and longer term-planning through Gravesham 2040.

Being A Listening Council

Actively engaging with our residents in the design and delivery of services through events such as the Big Conversation.

Excellence, Dynamism and Collaboration

Recognising that working together across the council can deliver real results for residents with a number of award-winning initiatives and success in grant funding opportunities.

Doing More with Less

Working with partners to deliver key services for our residents such as homelessness initiative, improved energy efficiency and financial stability through the LIFT project.

Stewardship

Overseeing the careful use of finite resources to ensure delivery of services and other key projects to meet local need.

Gravesham Borough Council has, and will continue to, take a proactive approach to the way in which it ensures the continued delivery of council services ensuring robust management of resources (not only financial) and ensuring that the council acts as true leaders of the borough.

Use of resources

Transforming the way in which services are delivered and designed



In addressing the issues faced, the council has fundamentally reviewed the way in which it delivers its services through

Restructured senior management

A significant restructure of the senior management structure in place, reviewing and realigning the four directorates across the council and the management in place to support these services. Ensuring the services that interact with each other are aligned so that efficiencies can be brought about through joined up working.

Hybrid working

Introducing hybrid working to:

- Increase productivity in a number of areas across the council. The hybrid working policy has seen performance in a number of the council's back office functions such as income collection and planning improve, with staff sickness levels also reducing.
- Ensuring the council is able to compete in a very competitive recruitment market by offering flexibility to those who may wish to work for Gravesham, and have the skills required by the council to assist in its transformation journey.
- Provide staff with greater work-life balance which in turn has helped in the reduction of sickness levels across the council. This ensures officers are able to provide consistent services to the public.
- Ensuring a focused approach to the recruitment of officers where posts become vacant or new posts are identified as being required. Rather than simply recruiting 'like-for-like' the council reviews each post to ensure that the council's resources are being put into the areas of most need and redefining roles and responsibilities as required.

Continuous Improvement

Introducing a *Continuous Improvement Team* of officers to work with departments to identify ways in which they may be able to provide services in a more efficient way, reduce budget or generate income. To date, this team has supported the identification of over £200,000 of potential savings to the council's base budget, with a pipeline of reviews aiming to deliver a further £800,000 of savings. This builds upon the work of the previous *Service Review Team*, which delivered £2.4m in savings to the council.

Keeping services in-house

Maintaining services in house such as the waste management service and a repairs and maintenance service enabling the council to more effectively and quickly respond to changes in service demand and ensure customers are offered a good service across these important functions.

Productivity across the council is monitored through a number of mechanisms including a robust performance management framework that provides regular performance and budget monitoring reports to both management and Members. This ensures that all decision-makers are provided with the information they require to make informed decisions about the use of the council's resources. The council also has in place a Corporate Delivery Plan



which monitors the progress of the high-profile, strategic projects the council is involved in, ensuring that these projects are appropriately resourced but also delivering on their objectives.

Digital Improvement

Service improvement has been a significant aspect of ensuring the productivity of the council. There has been significant digital transformation in a number of areas such as:

Taxi licensing

Enabling a digital approach to the management of taxi licensing which has streamlined the service and significantly reduced the amount of paperwork and manual activities officers have to complete.

Waste management service

Introducing a digital solution to the routing and planning of works within waste and horticulture, which has ensured more efficient use of officer time. This approach has been shortlisted in The MJ Awards 2024.

Private Housing

Moving from operating a paper-based, inefficient service to implementing a completely new digital system enabling faster and more efficient workflow allowing the ability to allocate resources more freely to priority areas of work and significantly reducing the number of hours spent on data input.

Repairs and Maintenance

Introducing a robust, digital system to control all repairs and maintenance tasks so operatives are able to know their planned work for the day and move from one job to the next in the most efficient way.

Commercialisation

As a means to tackling the financial issues faced, the council has actively embraced commercialisation opportunities, to ensure that its resources are used, not only in the best way for the delivery of council services, but in ways in which it can assist in income generation for the council. The council has in place a commercial entity – Rosherville Limited – which has three subsidiary companies to support delivery of services to third parties in the borough and beyond. This approach has seen the council offer MOT, vehicle servicing and repairs and housing repairs and maintenance functions, to not only GBC residents and tenants but to businesses and landlords both in the borough and beyond. This has enabled income to be brought back into the council and reinvested in council services.

The council has introduced a Social Lettings Agency in order to work with landlords to ensure a continued supply of accommodation for those people who require temporary accommodation. This has been brought in as a preventative measure to try and reduce the significant expenditure that has been incurred previously in sourcing suitable accommodation and is already starting to have an impact.



The Low Income Family Tracker project is another key project which has significantly supported residents of the borough, through identifying those individuals who are most likely to fall into financial difficulty, and working with them to identify benefits that they are entitled to but may not be claiming. This expands beyond just those benefits provided by the council and has so far identified £2.2m of additional income for residents in the borough.

Capital spending has a role to play in the transformation of current service as well as the opportunity to explore new opportunities. However, the ability to source affordable funding to support capital projects is critical and with PWLB borrowing rates increasing, this is proving difficult and costly.

Use of technology and data to support service delivery and design

The council has in place a robust approach to data quality, ensuring that all performance data and budget information presented to management and Members is accurate, aiding effective decision making. The structure of the decision-making approach at Gravesham enables thorough challenge and provides a business case approach to key projects, ensuring all elements of a project – risk, governance, finance, corporate outcomes etc. – are considered before a decision is made.

Sharing of data to support service delivery and design is undertaken as far as is possible and in line with GDPR regulations. This has helped to identify specific areas of the borough where more targeted work is required such as in terms of health inequalities and deprivation, but the use of this outside of the council is limited due to GDPR regulations. There have also been issues with delays from other government departments in signing the formal agreements required to enable legitimate data sharing.

There are some barriers to full integration of systems, due to some of the council's systems being older or set up in a way in which is not conducive to linking to other systems. This has already been identified by the council and there is a process in place to methodically work through the council's systems, to ensure that all aspects of system interactions are considered at the same time.

There is also the potential to use AI in the delivery and design of council services and although this has been used to some degree, it has not yet been fully harnessed at Gravesham. Data analytics is often used to drive service delivery, such as through interaction with the Police for Community Safety purposes, predictive information around rents, homelessness and potential damp and mould issues is also used to predict areas of activity.

Use of resources – monitoring spend and use of staffing resources

The council has always been good at monitoring its expenditure and ensuring it has robust governance arrangements in place, as demonstrated by the fact the council had a balanced medium-term financial budget before the financial crisis hit. This is also supported by the self-assessment the council undertook against the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) guidance for addressing cultural and governance failings in



local authorities, which concluded that the council has many strengths in its organisational culture and governance arrangements. This is further recognised through the external assessments of the council's governance arrangements by the LGA Peer Challenge process and the external auditor, Grant Thornton, which support that the council has robust governance arrangements in place to support the actions it needs to take to manage its financial position

The current situation has simply enabled the council to further strengthen this approach to ensure that any expenditure is directly attributable to the delivery of council services. If the council's budget had grown by the rate of inflation, it would stand at £24m unlike the £15m that it is in reality, yet the council is still doing the same, if not more, with the budget that it has as in 2010-11.

Officers of the council are actively engaged in budget saving, income generation and service efficiencies and have engaged in numerous activities to ensure that budgets are stringently monitored such as through a 10% budget saving exercise and the work of the Continuous Improvement Team.

Where appropriate the council does engage in 'Invest to Save' initiatives and has a specific reserve set aside for these types of initiatives. An example of this is with the council bringing the clinical waste service back in house. Whilst there was a small capital outlay required, the annual saving of bringing this service back in house is £20,000.

The council has ensured that Equality and Diversity (EDI) is embedded across the council through the HR Services provided. Reports that are presented to management and/or Members are required to give due consideration to the impact the decision will have on equalities and diversity and all policy changes require a desktop equalities impact assessment to be undertaken.

The council also explores ways in which it can work more effectively either through partnership working or through shared services. Each year the council publishes a register of all of its partnership and shared working arrangements, which clearly sets out the priorities of these arrangements and how they contribute to the overall delivery of council objectives. This is supported by a *Working in Partnership Framework* which is used when identifying any new potential arrangement to ensure that all aspects of the arrangement are considered from governance, finance, risk to impact on safeguarding and climate change. Wherever possible, training costs are shared across partners such as with Safeguarding and DAHA training.

The council works with a number of entities to work towards meeting its corporate objectives:

- Working with Hill Group through the *Gravesham Community Investment Partnership* to deliver housing for local people within the borough of Gravesham both through the provision of social housing and private housing. This enables more to be delivered in the borough, without the need to increase the council's budget.
- Through its commercial entity Rosherville Property Development Limited, the council is working with Reef Group to deliver The Charter development in the borough, providing



242 build-to-rent properties, the first of their kind, in the borough. These will be locally marketed for local people in the first instance.

The council recognises that from time to time it will need to engage external experts to support its activity, particularly given the growing complexity of the environment in which the council operates and the projects it is undertaken to deliver against its Corporate Plan objectives. The use of consultants can bring a number of benefits to the council:

- Expertise and new skills - Consultants can offer specialised knowledge and skills that are not available within the officer core or provide support where capacity is limited due to role vacancies etc.
- Cost savings: Use of consultants can save money in the longer term as they are used for a finite period or project, rather than being part of the staffing establishment.
- Market insight: Consultants can offer alternative perspectives and provide market and industry-leading experience and knowledge of market trends.
- Objectivity: Consultants can provide an unbiased view of business challenges.
- Broader options for solutions: Consultants are able to propose and tailor solutions to specific issues based on their wider knowledge of their field of expertise.

In each instance, the value added from obtaining external expert support is assessed and the council seeks to use external funding sources to meet the costs of these services where this is possible. In 2023/24 the revenue cost of using external experts equated to 3.7% of the council's General Fund net revenue budget for the year, with 30% of these costs met from external funding sources.

Barriers to service delivery to be addressed

The most significant barrier facing the council and the way in which it is able to plan services, is the lack of long-term financial sustainability. The approach to the local government financial settlement, with the annual determination of funding is not conducive to effective, long-term planning. A longer-term settlement, providing certainty for local authorities would enable much better planning of resources. This, coupled with clarity of government policy and direction would enable spending to be more strategically effective.

The lack of flexibility in fees and rates and the centralised control of fees is another barrier that is creating additional financial burdens for local authorities. The stringent regulations that have been put in place by central Government do not allow local authorities the flexibility to set fees and charges (for some services) that are required to cover the cost of delivering services. More discretion is required to ensure local authorities are able to operate on a true cost-recovery basis, without having to further subsidise services to the public.

In addition, allowing local authorities to increase the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate for temporary accommodation to reflect current rates would help to reduce the significant financial shortfall that all local authorities are facing. The government could also support local authorities by providing the full cost of demand led pressures like temporary accommodation. The cost-of-living crisis has seen a significant increase in the temporary accommodation and homelessness costs for all local authorities and this cost is being



borne by local authorities, with money having to be diverted from other services, which are in significant need. This is not a sustainable way for council's to operate.

Reducing the burden on local authorities in terms of the returns that are required by central Government, which often overlap and duplicate each other, would allow officers to better spend their time providing fundamental services to the public. The introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) promised a reduced burden on local authorities, but this has not been the case in practice. Moving away from a grant bidding approach to external funding, and basing this on genuine need, would significantly reduce the burden and uncertainty placed on local authorities.

To address these issues, true, meaningful engagement from central Government is required to fully understand the issues that all local authorities are facing, but to also work with local authorities to put in place solutions for the issues faced. There is a need for central Government to act in a faster, more responsive manner and ensure that legislation is updated in a timely manner to support delivery of services. In addition, there is a need for Government to embrace and invest in a pipeline of talent for the sector through promotion, training and development opportunities an relaxing the rigidity around the use of the apprenticeship levy.

The council will continue to monitor its productivity through the [regular performance monitoring data](#) that is provided to both officers and Members and the budget monitoring processes that are in place.

We would implore central Government to address these issues to ensure that local authorities are able to continue to provide services that the residents of the borough not only want, but need.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John P. Burden".

Cllr John Burden
Leader of the Council

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stuart Bobby".

Stuart Bobby
Chief Executive