Appendix A

Local Government Productivity Plan – Harlow Council

Introduction

Harlow was created just after the Second World War to give people a better future – and that's just as important today for everyone who lives and works in Harlow. Our town has a strong track record of innovation – fibre optics were invented here – and that spirit of invention and discovery will play a part in our reinvention of Harlow. Our staff are proud of the place we call our town and are already focusing on the day-to-day services that make a difference across the town – tackling issues in the street, repairing council homes and delivering more housing for local people. We'll continue to put what's important to residents first, despite the financial pressures we, like all councils, are facing. Modern Local Government requires Local Authorities to be Place Leaders. Harlow Council has set out its credentials, its plan and its priorities as a Place Leader. Through new executive Leadership, the Council will introduce further improvements and new ways of working to deliver its priorities.

This Productivity Plan sets out the council's work to date to demonstrate what is working well for us to increase and enhance existing services to our residents, our financial approach to controlling expenditure and the barriers to change that we are facing. It will also set out how we will identify further ways to continue to deliver services, unlock future opportunities, and monitor and measure success.

Context

As a district council Harlow Council works to fulfil its own statutory responsibilities and provide services that residents want and need, and to be a valued partner of other public services providers. As an organisation we want Harlow Council to build a culture of continuous improvement by putting what's important to residents first, being transparent about the decisions we make and focusing on the services that make a difference. With our partners we want Harlow to have healthy and safe communities with access to housing, education and skills to provide a better future for everyone who lives and works in Harlow. The strategic priorities for our partners in Harlow include the provision of a new hospital.

We want to create and maintain a place where people of all ages enjoy spending their time, through providing high quality housing, renewed neighbourhoods, green spaces and a thriving town centre that meets the needs of the community. As part of delivering this, the Town is embarking on a physical transformation, with funding secured to deliver a first phase of redevelopment. Harlow is also the key partner in the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town programme, which will see 24,000 new homes built in and around the boundary of the Town. The planned growth is set out in the Local Plan, which is due for review in 2025. The opportunities presented to Harlow through this planned growth is significant and the Council has to ensure that it has the correct capacity and capabilities to enable this growth, provide the infrastructure and deliver the services needed by its communities.

Work to date

We have improved the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources through process changes, use of technology and joint working with partners; examples of these are included below:

- Developing extra capacity within the relevant Council functions to support and promote its growth Agenda, including developing a Programme Management Office (PMO).

- Co-location of police and community safety staff within the local authority to create better sharing of appropriate information driving better outcomes in area of reducing anti-social behaviour.
- Seven years of a local authority trading company delivering building maintenance and environmental services with the aim of leveraging the potential of being a LATCo, and innovating in public and commercial delivery, benefitting residents in Harlow.
- Use of self-serve functions for digitally enabled residents, increasing the number of services that are available via online forms.
- Use of self-serve functions for digitally enabled residents to provide data through mapping displays so that residents can see information relevant to the area they live, e.g. showing planning applications, traffic regulation orders, local councillor details as well as partner data relating to schools and health facilities. In so reducing enquiries via phone or in person so that customer service focus can be on those most in need.
- Migration to cloud environment for IT services creating additional flexibility for employees to work on IT applications whilst out on site.
- Use of IT applications to manage staff workflows in Revenue and Benefits teams, allocating work where capacity is available.
- Use of middleware between IT Applications to reduce administration work in data entry through automated data transfer from online forms to back-office systems in licensing teams.

Productivity is currently measured in the organisation through corporate performance indicator data and an annual delivery plan for Corporate Plan, which in turn informs team plans and individual performance reviews. The council's Corporate Plan was set using a range of data sources held both by the council and partners, as well as resident survey data, to identify priority areas for improving and increasing service delivery. Monthly monitoring of complaints, Member and MP enquiries also provides insight into resident feedback on delivery of services. Specific customer facing performance is measured through data collected on phone calls and satisfaction surveys for the customer advisor team.

Capital funding has a role to play in transforming services and unlocking new opportunities. Delivery programmes including the Harlow Innovation Park, targeting economic growth and job creation by balancing land promotion and private sector development disposals to facilitate inward investment. A portfolio approach allows the Council to realise value from assets in a positive way and then reinvest capital to support and enhance the wider growth initiatives. We are starting a review of the council's future capital programmes to ensure they are aligned to the correct priorities and future requirements. Capital monitoring is carried out regularly with finance teams and project owners to ensure expenditure and financing is managed appropriately and transparently reported to the Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet through existing channels.

Plans for transformation

The council's corporate missions include high performing council services. We want to deliver services that match what residents want and need both now, and for the future, recognising that we serve residents for their lifetime and that requires the ability to adapt and change. We welcomed a Corporate Peer Challenge in 2023, the outcomes of which we saw as a great opportunity to shape cultural change, improve performance and reshape the function of the council. We were highly commended for this work in the 2024 Local Government Chronicle Awards and we want to continue this work, striving for excellence in all service provision. Looking forward we will re-align our service

delivery models with the outcomes in our corporate plan. The Council will kickstart its Transformation programme with service reviews designed at driving efficiency across the organisation, re-configuring services to deliver better outcomes, introduce more advanced technology where appropriate and scope the opportunities to implement and/ or join shared services. A commissioning based approach will drive further efficiencies within its contracted services.

We plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources. We will improve the quality of the data we collect through designing consultations and surveys with end data use in mind, looking at how we will use that data as well as what the data will tell us. Working with partners the council is part of a cross authority steering group as part of the garden town delivery to explore effective data collection and sharing to overcome barriers of data collection fatigue and repetition.

The council's approach to using IT solutions to transform services is to focus on service design first, application of technology second, introducing IT solutions when it is right to do so based on best outcomes for residents, rather than because we can. The council has seen positive outcomes using technology to improve workflows and systems using middleware and we are keen to exploit this and other new technologies further. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) is relatively untested on a large scale and the council is aware of the possible risks in using such technology and therefore does so with specific parameters in place to ensure data security and integrity and accuracy of any outputs created through use of AI.

We understand the importance of monitoring our performance and we will drive positive performance using experience of key officers, benchmarking and peer networking. Our monitoring framework will not only include normal performance indicator publication and scrutiny but also draw upon the experience of our Chief Executive Officer who will provide internal evaluation of service re-design, as well as using sector networking to borrow best practice and, just as critically, understand how to recognise warning signs of poor performance before it occurs.

Financial approach to increasing productivity and delivery efficiency

The council analyses all spend within the organisation through monthly budget monitoring as well as more in depth spend analysis into high spend expenditure categories. Annual budget setting cycles in challenging financial climate have necessitated high levels of budget scrutiny over the past three years in particular.

The council is seeking to manage expenditure against its growth requirements; ensuring resources in its medium term financial planning are aligned to current and future service delivery requirements. The general fund receives income from revenue making services, such as commercial property rental and has implemented invest to save mechanisms using reserves for energy efficiency projects that fall outside of external funding criteria. The portfolio based approach to finance and risk within the council's commercial development management allows for a transparent approach, seeking to maximise value for spend. The council's growth ambitions are shared with a number of key partners, including partner authorities in the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town delivery and alignment therefore is needed between the council's use of resource and the resources of its partners to ensure lean and efficient financial delivery of this significant growth of the town.

EDI activities within the organisation are embedded across all roles and as such part of mandatory training requirement for all staff. The cost of this training is negligible as it is delivered via in house e-learning platform. No expenditure is made in respect of EDI networks or programmes; again an in-

house approach is favoured with an EDI action plan developed via self-assessment and monitored for completion of milestones at senior management level. Effectiveness of the council's approach to EDI is measured through participation in the LGA government workforce data benchmarking programme.

Managing resource capacity is a key factor in ensuring efficient and effective delivery of services. Staffing resource is balanced between permanent and agency staff. Use of agency workers is kept to a minimum but is necessary due to challenges in the recruitment market for specialist skills. Recruitment challenges are seen across all service areas due to the competitive local and national market; changes to ways in working nationally mean that geographical barriers are virtually non-existent, presenting a real challenge in attracting and retaining key skillsets. Specifically legal services, environmental health, planning and homelessness support services have seen a real difficulty in attracting new staff in, additionally technical disciplines for building maintenance and compliance teams is another area where competition is high due to private sector demand for the same skills.

The council are tackling this issue through better understanding our workforce via regular pulse surveys to improve retention, attending jobs fairs and assemblies to raise awareness of local authority careers for school leavers, and offering apprenticeships and graduate development programmes in legal services and revenues and benefits to grow our own talent. Through developing our own staff we will reduce use of agency staff in difficult to fill disciplines. A partnership with Anglia Ruskin University has been fruitful in terms of raising awareness of local authority legal sector in general for undergraduates, and creating undergraduate work experience placements both on short and longer term basis. We are working closely with both the ARU law and business faculties to enhance our management of disrepair claims, and position the council for pipeline initiatives in this developing area. Officers and Members will input to the proposed local government law module planned for academic year 25-26.

 The percentage of total staff budget spent on agency staff is 10%. Consultancy services are used for delivery of short pieces of work where specialist skills are required for discrete projects only and permanent staffing is not required to cover that type of work, with percentage of staff budget spent on consultants being 5%. Value for money on agency & consultancy spend is assured via robust procurement processes, making use of frameworks and shared recruitment agreements with peer authorities.

Organisational development plays a key role in increasing productivity through upskilling staff to keep abreast of legislation and working practices, as well as advancements in technology to assist with working methods. Succession planning also plays a part in maintaining productivity and continuity of service delivery at a strategic level.

The council participates in several development events and/or programmes of activities in priority areas working collaboratively to achieve savings and efficiencies through cost sharing. For example, with EELGA (East of England Local Government Association), Vine HR, Lexcel, Provide (NHS), Essex County Fire & Rescue Service. Participating across Local Government and the wider public sector allows for a great increase in purchasing power that results in procurement savings whilst reducing administration and allowing for greater economies of scale thus reducing duplication of efforts.

The Council complies with the Trade Union (Deduction of Union Subscriptions from Wages in the Public Sector) Regulations, also known as the 'Check-off' regulations. The Council has seen a reduction in the numbers of subs it processes, it has an annual process in place to ensure that it recovers the costs from Trade Unions for processing subs via the monthly payroll.

Barriers to change

Strategic risk management play a part in understanding barriers and opportunities which affect the council achieving its priorities. Financial sustainability, workforce retention/ development, impact of legislative changes and ensuring effective engagement with partners are all recognised strategic risks for the council.

Longer term funding settlements would allow the council to better plan for delivery and develop services. Clarity around NNDR models would also create funding consistency, such consistency would increase opportunity for financial sustainability for specific service delivery streams. Additionally barriers around ringfenced funds prevent the council from pursuing opportunities available to them and relaxation of these would allow the council to go further in investing in different ways of working. Similarly distinctions between what private and public sector are permitted to do under legislation can hamper public sector delivery against private sector competition, holding back income generation.

Investment in new ways of working requires confidence in possible solutions to ensure value for money can be achieved. New IT technology advancement moves very fast and councils are faced with challenges when deciding which technologies to consider. For example, AI, automation and use of open source applications all present opportunities but central guidance on preferred technologies, and funding for trials of new solutions would usefully provide confidence and peer learning in this area. The same applies on an environmental sustainability front, where it is not clear which technologies to invest in and when.

The council is clear that capacity building for its future ambitions is key to its success. It is recognized that the local authority people talent pool is limited, and key skills across core corporate abilities to run and lead organisations, as well as specific PMO functions, are a risk to the ability of all council's to operate into the future. With Harlow's growth ambitions the council is pleased to have an experienced, and well regarded Chief executive at the helm, with a strong set of senior mangers in place to attract in relevant skill sets to take the council forward. Prioritization and focus on the skills and resources needed linked to service delivery requirements is essential. The need for specific hard to recruit skills are also a barrier to unlocking opportunities to expand or enhance service delivery where lack of availability of appropriate staff slows down progress and delivery. Central investment and incentivisation into this would create more capacity within public sector. Councils provide a disproportionately wide variety of services compared to single private sector entities; it's part of what makes the sector so interesting and can be a catalyst for innovation, however strong central prioritization on expectations would allow for better focus of resources and better direct opportunities for shared services.