



DARLINGTON

Borough Council

Productivity Plan

2024/25

Introduction

1. Darlington Borough Council continually strives to ensure value for money services for its residents and partners. Being the third smallest Unitary Authority in the country we do not have the luxury of economies of scale some Local Authorities have however the advantage of being small is that we can achieve our ambitions, through being nimble, innovative with the deployment of resources, focused on delivery and harnessing strong partnerships.
2. As part of the Local Government Finance Settlement the government requested that all councils produce a Productivity Plan to be submitted to the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities. Whilst this is the first productivity plan, Darlington has always had a focus on efficient and effective use of resources for our residents and communities and has a strong governance framework to achieve this through the Council Plan, setting out our vision, aims and objectives; our four year Medium Term Financial Plan; a strong performance management framework, and external validation and assurance through our auditors and inspection bodies.
3. The Government have asked that the four following questions be considered.

How we have transformed the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources.

4. Darlington has a culture of innovation and transformation and has always strived to make the best use of resources. Following significant reductions (£46m in real terms) in public spending from 2010 to 2019 the council has reduced in size substantially, cutting budgets to match resources and losing 747 members of staff in the process. In 2016 the council undertook a significant deep dive exercise reviewing all service provision and introducing a core offer of statutory services along with a small discretionary service offer of around £5m. Since then, we have maximised the limited resources available continuing to reduce the costs of service provision in the context of rising demand. Despite the reductions Darlington benchmarks well in comparison to its nearest neighbours confirmed by the Office for Local Government (Oflog) and the Chartered Institute for Public Finance (Cipfa) financial resilience indicators.
5. To protect front line service budgets, we have a small management and back office team. The Chief Executive holds a director portfolio for economic growth with the other three directors being twin hatters covering several portfolios. This extends across the whole management team where very few managers have one focused role. This is achievable as we work together as a strong team and do not work in silos or with demarcation lines.
6. An early example of productivity is our partnership with Stockton Borough Council for all transactional Human Resources, Finance, Design and print and ICT strategy and operations. Xentrall was formed back in 2008 and has delivered savings of over £15m, at the same time the quality and performance has improved. Xentrall has subsequently grown providing services for other public sector bodies.
7. More recently the Children's Services sufficiency programme agreed by Council in February 2024 sees a number of initiatives being undertaken to try and stem the rising number of children coming into Council care. It includes additional provision of in-house premises to reduce the number of high cost placements whilst providing a local stable home for children

and an improved foster care offer to encourage more people to become carers.

<https://democracy.darlington.gov.uk/documents/s21061/240215%20%20Medium%20Term%20Financial%20Planning%20MTP%20Appendix%208.pdf>. Darlington has taken a Strengthening Families approach and worked with the DFE and Leeds City Council with a focus on relational practice and family led solutions to reduce the need for statutory involvement.

8. Across the council a pragmatic approach to agile working has been taken. Long before Covid, social workers and financial assessment staff were using laptops to complete assessments in resident's homes and not have to come back to the office to dock or spend time finding a car parking space, consequently the number of assessments completed increased. This is particularly the case for statutory visits in children's services. We have also made savings by rationalising buildings following this change.
9. In the aftermath of covid we have pushed the technology agenda and were early adopters of Microsoft 365 with teams and hybrid meetings significantly reducing travel time between council offices along with reducing the carbon footprint. Technology has also allowed us to be paper free with all Councillors using laptops saving the reams of paper that used to be produced for committee meetings.
10. We are committed to working closely with NHS colleagues to achieve timely and effective hospital discharges. To maximise our impact in this area, we jointly commissioned an external review of our in house Reablement service. The outcome of the review was a full re-design of our delivery model to reflect 'best in class' working practices. Our discharge performance is now among the best nationally and we are effective in reducing the need for long term support: 91% of people who receive short term support no longer require support or need it at a lower level and, when surveyed, 90% of people who have received a service feel that they have improved. This robust performance has been delivered at a time when demand has increased by 30%.
11. Opportunities have been developed with the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) and other Tees Valley Local Authorities to develop more effective partnerships to deliver services more efficiently, especially in transport and regeneration. In transport shared services are being developed in traffic management and public transport facilities to lever in investment and provide improved services. In regeneration, the Council have worked in partnership with TVCA to ensure sites are not only shovel ready for development but in some cases office and incubator space have been provided speculatively to increase inwards investment and the creation of jobs within the Borough. The Council has built two incubator buildings for new start-ups and a Grade A office block which is fully occupied.
12. Further examples of transformation include.
 - Darlington was an early adopter with LED Street lighting reducing our energy consumption by 64%.
 - We have several Joint Venture companies building houses in the borough which helps meet housing demand and delivers a profit for the council which is reinvested into core services.
 - In education, development of parent and professional portals has streamlined the Education Health and Care Plan process.

- Darlington has entered a strategic joint waste management contract with the Tees Valley authorities along with Durham County Council and Newcastle City council to maintain a unified approach, provide residents with value for money and contribute to becoming an exemplar region for clean energy and low carbon use.
 - The Council has facilitated co-location of Council and Police services to form a community hub, where the services work closely together to tackle ASB and crime across the Borough. The Council has levered in additional funding through the Safer Streets Programme
13. Capital resources are limited however we maximise usage for economic growth, energy efficiency and to boost our council housing with an ambitious plan of an additional 1,000 new council homes built over the next ten years. We work closely as part of the Tees Valley Combined Authority and use available funds to transform our built landscape with £35m on a newly refurbished Railway Museum, Hopetown, and the £140m revamp of Darlington east coast mainline train station along with acquiring some key sites for redevelopment and enhancement of the Town centre. Our Town's fund is being utilised for developing key sites and transforming the Town centre increasing premium office space as well as creating a new model. We are investing in our estate to improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions with LED light replacement and photo voltaic cell network at our leisure centre.
14. Darlington has a strong governance framework through which resources are managed. Productivity is measured in several ways across the council with services using a range of indicators which are monitored by managers and the leadership team monthly with political oversight through quarterly budget monitoring and half yearly performance reports to Cabinet reviewed by all scrutiny committees. Comparison metrics can be found in the latest performance report <https://democracy.darlington.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=137&MIId=2639>
15. For external validation we are proactive with Local Government Association Peer Reviews, the last one being Summer 2022 with a positive outcome, and we use the Oflog and Cipfa resilience index to identify areas for improvement. In additional we have external validation from our Auditors where we consistently receive a positive outcome and value for money judgement, and assurance reviews from Ofsted who rated the council good with some areas outstanding in the last review.

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

16. The council understands that technology and data quality is key to increasing productivity and is constantly looking to improve systems and processes. Ongoing development of corporate ICT systems and related processes are leading to efficiencies across the council and effective use of systems is benefiting many areas such as children's and adult services, street scene, planning, customer services, and leisure services. They are streamlining decision making processes through automation where appropriate, efficiently, and securely managing and processing data, helping council functions to plan and operate more efficiently, and opening up automated ways to support customer services related activities. Our ongoing work with MS365, including Power BI, Co-Pilot, and the exploration of other artificial intelligence related opportunities are intended to bring further productivity improvements to the council in the future.

17. Our Customer Services and digital strategy aims to deliver excellent customer services that are easy to use and provide value for money to residents, where possible we provide digital access to our services including online application, service requests, information and payments which are easy to use and at any time of the day to suit our residents. This not only improves productivity but also provides a better service to our residents. We are of course mindful to avoid digital exclusion.
18. Our Adult social care digital strategy focus is enabling and encouraging those who can use digital and online tools to do so. This makes services available at a time to suit users; provide quick and appropriate channels when we are contacted for advice and support, empower and support staff to use digital tools and support and enable care providers to use technology to change the way services are delivered.
19. An exciting new development is the investigation into a new children's portal which will be a gateway to interacting online for children, young people, their parents, and carers as well as other professionals. Key information gathered will be captured and stored against their records, which will bring efficiencies to the Council's current business processes and improve the evidence of the voice of children, parents, and carers in their own records. Here are a few examples to illustrate
 - Parents and Children contributing towards Early Help assessments, care planning and reviews.
 - Children telling us about their wishes and feelings about key events (e.g. reviews)
 - Young people contributing to their plans (e.g. Care Leavers contributing to Pathway Plans)
 - Foster carers contributing towards information you require to support care planning and/or in helping them to care for your child or young person.
 - Users providing feedback about their experiences of services (e.g. Early Help Interventions, Adoption and Fostering Panels)
 - Prospective carers (e.g. adopters and foster carers) submitting expressions of interest and other recruitment related documentation on-line.
20. Other examples of digital transformation include+: -
 - Introduction of a booking system in our leisure centre and digital kiosks allowing member check in freeing up reception staff and providing a better experience for members. In addition, the introduction of QR codes to order food and beverages will save staff time.
 - Early Years Education system implemented which has reduced off systems processes and increased productivity in areas such as attendance. We will also be going live with the delegation portal in September withing SEN services capturing application and supporting evidence in one place as well as allowing relevant external agencies to add their own data.
 - Netcall, analysis of our customer services call volumes and waiting times – historical information enables us to staff up at key times e.g., council tax billing.
 - Report it App, has been developed allowing residents to raise issues through an App e.g., road repairs. The report goes direct to the service for completion which improves the service for residents as they can report and track responses and action, and it improves efficiency with less calls coming into the contact centre which require handling.

How we plan to reduce wasteful spend within the organisation and systems

21. Following significant funding cuts since 2010 and the subsequent expenditure reductions the council does not have any 'gold plated' spend and there are limited opportunities to reduce this spend further. The budget is allocated to core offer statutory services with a very small amount left for discretionary services.
22. Notwithstanding this we have a culture of innovation and continual improvement across the whole council. This is promoted from day one at staff induction sessions held by the Chief Executive and promoted through our workforce strategy where it is one of our Core values. Our employees are aware of our financial challenges and ideas for improvements are encouraged.
23. Our transformation programme looks across all services areas and is focused on reviewing systems and processes and utilising technology to streamline service provision, income generation through economic growth and visitor attraction investment and collaboration with other public sector bodies and the voluntary sector.
24. We have a strong governance framework in place to ensure transparency and challenge of our expenditure and performance. The MTFP, and Council Plan performance are fully scrutinised and consulted upon before Council approval, and we monitor progress against our plans with regular reports to Scrutiny Committees, Audit and Cabinet. In addition there are gateways for spend approval including the procurement board which reviews spend over £10,000; vacancy authorisation control where any new post must have a business case and be approved by the leadership team; debt levels and overtime reports reviewed and scrutinised by Assistant Directors with debt over £500 requiring Cabinet approval for write off and agency spend reports reviewed by managers on a regular basis.
25. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has been noted by the government as an area to review, our spend on EDI is to meet the requirements of the Public Sector Equality duty and we have one officer of which part of their role is to assist the council with our statutory duties, providing staff and member training, and assisting with equality impact assessments when required. We also have equalities champions who meet on a quarterly basis to discuss any concern or issues that have been raised. Therefore, an excessive amount of time is not spent on these activities.
26. As noted previously we partner with Stockton Council on transactional finance, HR, ICT and print and design where significant savings have been made, and we are currently reviewing with Stockton if there are any further areas which could be shared.

Barriers preventing progress that the government can help to reduce or remove.

27. Funding

- **Annual finance settlements** are not efficient, not knowing what funding you have on a year to year basis does not promote good financial or service planning. Longer term settlements and indications on referendum levels are essential.
- **One off grant funding** is often announced without any consultation with councils who are left on the back foot trying to respond to resident's queries without an indication of the amount they will receive or timescales. In addition, adequate time is rarely given to plan a

fully effective scheme. e.g., the numerous energy grant distributions and the recent round of household support fund.

- **Bidding for one off grants.** There can be significant cost in drawing a bid together which is abortive if the bid is not successful. Subsequently if a bid is successful the monitoring and reporting that is required again takes considerable time and effort and feels excessive particularly for small grants. In addition, many of these bidding opportunities come with very short deadlines for submission and there is not capacity in a small organisation to get the bid completed (we staff for the troughs not the peaks) meaning bids are hurried require consultants to be used which is not an efficient or effective use of resources. These bidding wars are not conducive to providing value for money.
- **Ring fenced grants** are not helpful. Councils know what is needed in their areas and should be permitted to allocate resources in the best interests of their communities.
- **Adult Social Care.** The current funding model need to be reformed, funding does not match those areas with highest deprivation and need. The social care precept places the burden of social care funding on the local tax payer

28. Legislation and Governance

- **Timely and accurate provision of information** is key to being productive when delivering new legislative requirements. For example, the requirement to design and deliver a new waste collection service from April 2026, but without the details of the revenue funding to be provided. It has been announced that highway maintenance spending will increase but we have not been told by how much and when it will increase past the current year, making the planning and procurement of repairs for next year extremely challenging.
- **Remote Councillor meetings** were allowed during Covid. This was helpful for residents and members who cannot get to in person meetings and should be reinstated.
- **Audit** – there have been significant delays in external audit, we appreciate the issues auditors have had with staffing and changes in audit requirements, but this has put pressure on internal teams who have needed to re do work for the audit sometimes multiple times e.g., going concern. Differing audit firms are taking different approaches, this is not helpful, auditors appointed through the PSAA process should take the same line regarding audit completions.
- **Provider monopolies.** The children’s social care market is broken and there is some blatant profiteering in provider markets. Placement costs are out of control with the markets making demanding with councils having limited bargaining power particularly when under a court order. Regulation is needed. In the same vein the cost of corporate ICT systems is high, and suppliers have control over the industry, we are in the hands of the suppliers when it comes to upgrade and licenses costs which increase significantly.
- **Inspection regimes.** Whilst good governance and external audit is essential the external inspection regime does require significant resource to manage and is costly. There can be over regulation in this area and this year another two inspection regimes have been introduced. The preparation for inspection, administration burden pre, during and post inspections and post inspection reporting takes limited resources away from front line services. The balance is not right and needs to be reviewed.
- **Legal notices** must be published in local newspapers – given the readership they should be changed with the requirement for publication to be online on the website.