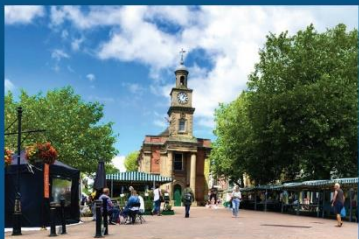


Newcastle-under-Lyme PRODUCTIVITY PLAN 2024 - 2025



Introduction

Here at Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council productivity is written into our ambitions and sits at the heart of our 4-year [Council Plan](#), which has as its Vision: ‘good local services, a prosperous borough, and safe and welcoming places for all’. The Council is committed to the delivery of high quality value for money services and achieved an average Band D Council Tax charge amongst the lowest 25% of all English District Councils for 2024/25 at just £2143.59.

Local Context

Our historic Borough is a place of marked contrasts. We are the home of a world class University at Keele, a leading light known internationally for its research and sustainability record, which stands side by side with former mining communities including some which register amongst the most deprived areas in the country. Our Borough is also a mixture of urban centres, affected by some of the same social issues facing our neighbouring city, Stoke-on-Trent, but also outstanding rural landscapes in our less populated villages. Our plans and priorities aim to address the needs of all our communities.

Newcastle operates within a three-tier structure (County, Borough and Town/Parish) and relationships with our place partners across these tiers and with other public sector agencies are generally constructive, productive and well established. For the past six years the Borough, County and Police teams have been co-located in Castle House. This was a means to drive efficiency, promote collaboration, and improve citizen access to services whilst supporting our town centre through the presence of a significant number of employees with their associated spending power. This has worked extremely well, with the collaboration and partnership working seeing a step change in effectiveness – as evidenced by our sector leading Vulnerability Hub.

Focused on Performance Productivity

As part of a wider programme of transformation, seeking to increase our performance and productivity; the Council recognised that it needed to strengthen its strategic capacity and focus in order to ensure a closer alignment between service delivery and the council’s stated ambitions. In late 2022 we invested resources into the creation of a new Strategic Hub, to lead and co-ordinate this lynchpin work. Now fully operational, the Hub is transforming the way that performance is planned, monitored and reported – using business intelligence tools to automate analysis and improve the data presented for scrutiny to aid decision-making.

Our new value for money Performance Framework ensures that the Council’s priorities are fully aligned and integrated into Priority Delivery Plans (PDPs) across the organisation, which in turn inform individual employee objectives at officer level. Progress against service-owned performance targets is reported to senior management monthly and to elected members on a quarterly basis and sits alongside financial monitoring data to provide a holistic view of productivity.

As part of its commitment to learning and improving, the council has also placed benchmarking as a core element in its new performance framework; participating in LG Inform and APSE benchmarking clubs, forming new near neighbour networking groups and building intelligence and insights into its performance reports in order to focus improvement activity. The latest analysis shows that NBC has many services performing amongst the top 25% of councils in the country including: planning processing times, low numbers of households in temporary accommodation, time taken to process housing benefit change events, affordable homes delivered and low planning appeals allowed.



As a learning Council, in March 2023 we welcomed a Corporate Peer Challenge as part of the LGA's sector-led improvement programme. The full Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report and the follow-up Progress Report from January 2024 were both extremely positive and can be viewed on the Council's [website](#). In summary the Peers found:

- ✓ Increased levels of employee satisfaction and engagement which is a real testament to how the organisation is run
- ✓ Staff the peer team met with again underlined their commitment to the Council and its aims and continue to be a tremendous asset to the organisation and the Borough
- ✓ The peer team were impressed with the Council's ambitions where it is aiming to be 'industry leading' in its approach to delivering regeneration
- ✓ The peer team continue to be impressed with how the Council manages its finances
- ✓ The peer team were impressed with the strength and depth of the partnership working and the active role which the Council plays

Transforming Service Delivery – One Council Programme

Over the last three years the Council has rolled out its award-winning '[One Council](#)' transformation programme, driving efficiency and productivity through service redesign and digital investment, coupled with staff development and a strengthened focus on performance management across the organisation. The ambitious programme has saved over £1m from our annual spend – equivalent to 6% of our net budget – helping the council set a balanced budget for 2024-25

The transformation programme is now moving to a business as usual phase after seeing successes in redesigning our 'front door', improving digital access to services, promoting self-serve for residents and businesses, widening the capacity of our customer hub and launching a new website for the Council. Across the programme we've achieved productivity gains of almost 50,000 employee hours; releasing over 39 FTE posts with no compulsory redundancies. Phone demand into the Council has been reduced by 32% through improved signposting upfront and access to 24/7 self-service options.

This year's stage of the programme involves less large scale organisational change, rather it is focussed on Performance Realisation - this is addressing particular drags on performance and efficiency, including sickness absence. The plan is in progress, which is targeted to save in the region of £230k.

Regeneration – Economic Productivity

The Council has been successful in securing over £50m in external funding through Town Deal and Future High Streets programmes – a level of government funding which is unprecedented for the area, and which is being used to transform our town centres and drive economic growth. This once-in-a-generation opportunity to boost the local economy will enable our communities to thrive and prosper and reset the local landscape for generations to come.

In addition, the Council also secured over £4m in UKSPF monies. In 2024-25 we will be allocating over £3m of this fund across 30+ projects and aim to create at least 70 jobs, attract over 20,000 new visitors to the town and surrounding area, and see over 25 new businesses created including 500m² of green space regenerated.



The Council has taken significant steps regarding its strategy for regeneration, most recently appointing social value developers Capital&Centric to masterplan three major projects - York Place, Midway Car Park and the Ryecroft. Capital&Centric have a specific business model which entails:

- Developing costed proposals for agreement by the Council with the Council funding the build stage
- Capital&Centric then purchase the asset at practical completion at either cost or value, whichever is greatest
- Capital&Centric retain and operate the realised assets, and curate the spaces thereafter, driving value into the asset and creating a sense of place.

This approach fundamentally re-profiles the Council's borrowing requirements to two to three years only, per development, rather than for asset life.

Other initiatives include a new employment, training and skills hub – The Workshop, which was refurbished using accelerated Town Deal funding. The refurbishment also provided us with the opportunity to improve the functionality of the premises by installing a heat pump for heating and cooling air conditioning along with adaptive LED lighting to save on energy use and cost.

According to the Office for National Statistics latest quarterly business births and deaths report, Newcastle-under-Lyme is bucking both the regional and national trend. Across England, between January and March 2024 there were 2,310 more business deaths than births and across the West Midlands 755 more deaths than births. However, more positively locally, in Newcastle there were actually more births - 105 business births and 90 deaths, so a 'positive change' of 15.

Stable and Sustainable Financial Management

The Medium Term Financial [Strategy](#) (MTFS) sets out the Council's financial position over the next 5 years, is aligned to the Council Plan 2022-2026 and ensures the targeting of resources to priority areas. The MTFS provides for a gap in 2024/25 of £2.692m and over the 5 year period of the MTFS of £6.885m. A number of savings and funding strategies have been identified as being both feasible and sustainable, via a vigorous Financial Efficiency Board process.

The Financial Efficiency Board is made up of the Leader of the Council, relevant Portfolio Holders and senior managers. Service Directors are asked to provide saving plans for the coming financial year and future years, which are then challenged and discussed with the Financial Efficiency Board. Once the saving proposals have been approved they are put forward as part of the MTFS update and form part of the budget setting process.

The Council also has a Borough Growth Fund of £0.25m, which was established in 2020 for the purpose of enabling investment in corporate priorities. The Borough Growth Fund is required to be used to invest in initiatives that are forecast to generate on-going revenue savings through reducing the costs of service delivery or through the generation of additional income.

The revised Commercial Strategy reflects the current restrictions on borrowing for specifically commercial return, and focuses on a broader suite of opportunities and approaches. As a commercial landlord of long standing we use our property portfolio to support local business growth and have a 91% occupancy rate, which adds over £1m of revenue each year.

Other projects within the strategy include exploration of the use of renewable energy options including a new solar array at Keele to increase green capacity, to support local business and to provide a new longer term source of revenue.



Plans for productive use of Data and Technology

The Technology Strategy sets our vision for technology and how the Council will utilise modern technologies and tools to enable, enhance and redefine how our services are delivered. The strategy sets out three strategic themes:

- **Residents & Customers** – Improving our digital services by supporting our residents to access services online. Whilst at the same time, rationalising legacy systems in order to enhance automation, efficiency and affordability
- **Workforce** – Investing in our people to ensure they have the digital skills and tools required to deliver services as effectively and efficiently as possible
- **Infrastructure** - Working to enhance the technological infrastructure within the Borough, through continued financial investment in areas such as cloud computing, cyber security and high-speed fibre broadband connectivity. Whilst supporting the Council's commitment to ensuring a sustainable future for our communities, striving to reduce our own impact on the environment

Through the Council's new Strategic Hub, the Council is developing its expertise in using business intelligence tools such as Power BI; creating bespoke dashboards that help teams plan performance, address demand hot spots and allocate finite resources to target the biggest return on investment. Our newly formed Environmental Enforcement Team have used data to streamline the time taken to deal with abandoned vehicle reports – reducing response times from 32 days in 2023 to 18 days in 2024.

We also employ customer segmentation data through Experian's MOSAIC tool to help plan services more accurately and to target increased uptake for services like our paid-for garden waste collection and improved recycling rates for food waste collections through targeted and bespoke campaign materials.

Productivity through Prevention

Our 'sector leading' Vulnerability Hub is evidence of our strong partnership work which is delivering impressive outcomes with over 1,000 users to date benefitting from a holistic approach to identifying and addressing support needs

Alongside this preventative service we also run a multi-agency Homelessness Hub with partners from across the Borough in order to improve engagement with rough sleepers and vulnerably housed individuals. Chaotic lifestyles mean appointment systems for rough sleepers and vulnerably housed individuals often fail and waste resources. The hub is designed to be a one stop shop where individuals can get access to information and advice including, accommodation services, wellbeing and recovery, as well as support regarding housing, benefits and training.

2022-23 saw rough sleeping reduce from 49 to just 6 through the work of our homelessness team and the support pathways offered. Numbers have remained similarly low this year and we are now progressing plans to acquire a property, which will provide safe, secure emergency accommodation to ensure "no-second night out" and provide an immediate space off the streets while investigations and referrals are done.

A productive and engaged Workforce



Our focus on promoting employee wellbeing has been recognised with the Bronze Thrive Accreditation, just seven months after our successful Foundation award - one of the fastest progressions seen to date. Coupled with a successful apprenticeship programme, strong partnerships with local education providers and a track record of internal talent management, we're committed to putting our People first and our new People Strategy is our roadmap to further developing this commitment.

Our Thrive Group is made up of staff volunteers from across the organisation who take on this volunteer role on top of their existing paid employment. The Council does not employ equality champions or have dedicated staff in similar type roles but instead ensures it meets its equalities duties through its HR policies and practices and its People Strategy. Our latest staff survey was incredibly positive:

- ✓ 90% are happy to own their objectives and get things done
- ✓ 95% understand what is needed to reach targets
- ✓ 90% understand how their role impacts and benefits residents.

Environmental Productivity – Reaching Net Zero

Addressing Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability is a major focus of the current administration with a target to meet net zero for the Council's own estate and activities by 2030, and for the wider borough by 2050. The Leader of the Council is the lead member for this agenda across Staffordshire, chairing the Staffordshire Sustainability Board under the Staffordshire Leader's Board. Council officers have led work to establish "10 base pledges" to which all the Staffordshire Councils have committed, clearing the way for the Board to focus on the more challenging policy areas where progress needs to be made.

Early actions undertaken include an urban tree planting strategy with 376 trees planted since 2021 and over 25,000 whips and feathers being planted this year. As well as improving biodiversity and facilitating future carbon capture, the development of community woodlands has provided assurance around sites which local communities were keen to protect from development.

Cabinet recently approved the use of Hydro-treated Vegetable Oil (HVO) fuel to replace white diesel in the majority of our waste and streetscene vehicles. This involves an investment of £70K as HVO costs 40p per litre more than diesel, but will reduce emissions by over 90% for those vehicles using it. The draft Local Plan will be a major tool in securing environmental sustainability, providing the ability to influence the sustainability of future developments across the borough.

Our refreshed Sustainable Environment Strategy is underpinned by themed delivery plans supported by a capital investment of over £8m for major projects such as the decarbonisation of council buildings and fleet. During 2024/5 the Council is investing in solar panels on a number of key Council buildings to support sustainable operations.

Productivity Challenges – Walleys Quarry

Since 2020 the Council has been grappling with an environmental crisis due to Hydrogen Sulphide (H₂S) escaping from Walleys Quarry - a local landfill site, which is regulated by the Environment Agency. This problem, which has been debated in Parliament, has generated over 20,000 complaints to the Council.

The scale of work undertaken by the Council on this issue continues to soak up a huge amount of corporate capacity and council taxpayer money as we pursue legal action in order to improve the



situation for local residents. Having secured an Abatement Notice against the site operator, the Council has found the operator to be in breach of this notice and is taking further legal action at considerable time and cost.

Definitive and decisive action by the Regulator, supported by central government would allow the Council and its residents to find a permanent solution to this environmental and financial blight, which is a drain on resources and highly contentious for the local community.

Expenditure Statistics Requested

We budget for £234,090 of agency/consultancy (excluding capital). This represents 1.37% of the net budget.

We budget for £10,500 of union recharges. This represents 0.06% of the net budget.

