

17th July, 2024

We are pleased to present Brentwood's Productivity Plan.

This Productivity Plan sets out Brentwood Borough Council's achievements to date and our plans to further embed our digital transformation plans, reduce bureaucracy, make better use of resources, and improve service delivery through collaboration with partners and stakeholder engagement. We will continue to monitor our performance, invest in our staff and services, and communicate our progress.

The plan was endorsed by Members on 11th July 2024.

The plan will be published on our website alongside key information to keep residents informed on progress. We intend to review the plan on a regular basis to ensure key updates are shared.

Our Corporate Priorities are being refreshed for 2025 but they are currently:

- Growing our economy
- Developing our communities
- Improving housing
- Delivering an efficient and effective council
- Protecting our environment

Our progress against the strategy is continually monitored by senior managers and relevant committees.

Question 1: How have you transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources?

Just over two years ago, Brentwood Borough Council and Rochford District Council formed a strategic partnership. This unique and challenging partnership aims to doing things differently, to consider alternative opportunities, to create resilience, to improve the quality of the provision and to reduce costs.

Outcomes include:

- Shared management team
- Service reviews, with sustainable service across both authorities, improved resilience and migration to shared technology and processes to further support efficiency
- Shared management team and service reviews provide an ongoing saving across BBC and RDC of £651,000pa from 2024/25.
- A joint procurement for a new leisure contract.
- Aligned processes and support tools for all areas of Transformation, Policy and Funding.
- Policy and strategy registers, processes and templates established, aligned policies and strategies in development.
- Joint Corporate Project Register and project management approach established.
- Joined up approach to corporate performance, FOI, formal complaints and risk monitoring and reporting.
- Joint approach to communications campaigns.
- Joint training opportunities.
- Joint CCTV monitoring.
- Emerging joint grants and funding strategy to expand service delivery in partnership with community groups and corporate partners.

- Aligned methodology for corporate vision and priority setting, monitoring, and reporting.

Members receive quarterly updates on the Strategic Partnership through the Programme Board and by quarterly update to committee. Further, we are committed to involving residents in the future of the partnership. Following our recent public consultation into the Strategic Partnership, we intend to provide more detail to residents on some of the key advantages of the partnership as well as the effect of 'doing nothing' against a backdrop of increasing pressures on council finances.

The next phase of transformation will consider where further work between the two services is needed before full integration. This will be documented in service area Transformation Plans. These will be supported by further monitoring of OfLog Metrics and benchmarking with other Essex authorities as part of the Essex Policy and Performance Network of officers and by making use of LG Inform.

As well as quarterly Performance and Formal Complaints reporting to committee, senior officers also benefit from a monthly Health of the Organisation report. We will further strengthen our reporting methods by implementing PowerBI across more services for a more efficient performance management process.

The effect of the partnership and other efficiency measures is reported quarterly to Members through Budget Monitoring Reports.

Beyond our partnership with Rochford District Council, Brentwood also has shared service arrangements with Basildon Borough Council for Revenues and Benefits, Thurrock Council for Environmental Health and Licensing, Braintree District Council for payroll, and is a member of South Essex Councils (SEC) (Vision and priorities and Meeting Agendas & Minutes), and Essex Partners.

An LGA Corporate Peer Challenge was carried out March 2024. Following the report, the upcoming Peer Review Action Plan to be published by August 2024 with a progress Review expected in December 24.

Seven Arches Investment Limited (SAIL) is a company wholly owned by Brentwood Borough Council which was set up to be its commercial arm. It aims to be forward thinking and innovative whilst securing much needed revenue funding to the Borough. Currently it is achieving this by direct ownership of investment properties and managing properties owned by Brentwood Borough Council, but other avenues are constantly being investigated.

In 2023, Brentwood, Shenfield and Ingatestone businesses voted to create a unique Business Improvement District (BID). Brentwood Connected is the first BID in the UK to incorporate three high streets in one. Over 500 businesses across multiple sectors will benefit from events, projects and initiatives that increase footfall, dwell time and perception of the area, with £2m to be spent on improving the area over the next five years. Whilst the Council is the host authority, the BID is an autonomous body responsible for monitoring and managing the spend and project successes as well as communicating this directly with residents and businesses. Reports will be taken to committee for information as appropriate.

Through feedback from the Community Safety Partnership along with joint operations with Essex Police, we will continue to strengthen partnerships with CSP & District wide partners, including Essex Police to

- Highlight hot spot areas and emerging trends and action resolutions and tackle repeat offenders
- improve awareness of Domestic Abuse and improve public confidence in reporting and reducing DA
- reintroduction of Hate Incident Reporting Centres and ambassador training for front line staff
- Violence Against Women and Girls: Implementation of Safer Streets projects to improve women's safety.
- Improving CCTV: Implementation of CCTV in housing stock and ongoing monitoring and CCTV restructure.
- Brentwood and Rochford have joint working with partner organisations to improve public health:
- Linking with Castle Point Borough Council and the Essex County Council statutory Health Board.
- Brentwood and Basildon Alliance work linked to Integrated Care Board
- Employ a Public Health Practitioner and Apprentice liaison with ECC Public Health team

Brentwood and Rochford share a Community Connect Trailer which is used to improve consultation and engagement with the community on public health issues.

Question 2: How do you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources?

Brentwood is a member of Essex Digital Partnership (EDP). The partnership strives to share knowledge, resource, and services to provide digital and technology solutions that support the business needs of each member.

Guided by our Digital Strategy and supported by a Joint IT and Digital Helpdesk, we are driving a programme that will see the organisation's data centered in a data warehouse that will allow us to surface and interrogate our data in a way that has never be available to us.

In December 2023, the first edition of the new residents' publication, Brentwood Our Borough, was distributed to homes across the borough. This supports our ability to communicate directly with our residents on current projects, council services – and how they can access them. This is complemented by the council news, services and events available on our website and shared on our social media channels. We also have resident and business e-newsletters that can be subscribed to via our website.

Brentwood and Rochford's joint consultation and engagement platform, Engage with Us, provides opportunity to go beyond basic questionnaires and surveys to give residents and communities a voice. Our emerging joint Consultation and Engagement Strategy will ensure that we develop ways in which we can involve citizens and the voluntary sector in the design of the services and lend their voice to local decision making.

Brentwood is within the median for major planning applications overturned on appeal, amongst the highest for major / non major applications determined on time and below average for non-major planning applications overturned on appeal. The Council has worked through a series of improvement projects through a joint Planning Improvement Board with Rochford. Projects include those to improve the efficiency of the service through increased use of IT and templates and review of processes. A business manager post has been created within the service which will undertake a programme of continuous review and improvement for the planning service. Data is shared and monitored at a national level and at a local level via information dashboards to allow managers to easily spot trends in performance across a range of measures and act as appropriate.

Brentwood Environmental Business Alliance (BEBA) is a new initiative bringing together businesses across the borough. Founded by key local businesses and supported the council with key local businesses, its aim is to encourage more sustainable and environmentally friendly practices by providing a platform to collaborate and learn – an inclusive place where businesses at any stage of the journey can identify information resources to help achieve their green goals.

The Council implemented Housemark Photobook to ensure consistency in approach for estate, repairs and other inspections as well as give the ability for task notification to be sent directly to different departments. Staff have been issued with tablets so they can access real time information with a view to expand this using the Housing Management system in the same way. Providing Housing officers with more digital devices and platforms allows them to work out on our estates and be able to answer questions from residents in real time. This has also mitigated the requirement for officers to travel to and from the office and reduce duplication.

We use Savills Housing Asset Performance system to assist us with both social and economic information to help inform strategic decisions for our assets on an individual, street, or block basis. Improving the way that tenants can communicate with the Council and self-serve by creating an integrated tenants' portal. Tenants are communicated with via our newsletter, focus groups, our tenant talkback resident involvement panels and online consultations.

Brentwood's partnership and expertise has enabled Rochford to deliver a project to install seven strategically positioned CCTV cameras outside of prominent establishments along Rayleigh High Street. With 24 hour viewing from Brentwood's CCTV Control Room, the cost-effective new CCTV system is designed to assist community safety initiatives, employing both prevention and detection tactics to address anti-social behaviour and criminal activities effectively. It is also expected to have positive impacts for the businesses operating in that area, particularly in respect of the night time economy.

Implementation of CCTV in housing stock and ongoing monitoring and CCTV restructure.

Question 3: Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems

Whilst the Council already aims to provide value for money for our residents, through our partnership with Rochford District Council, Brentwood will produce a series of service level Transformation Plans that will seek to further maximise efficiencies across a range of areas including procurement, process design, IT programs, policies,

performance, projects and, where appropriate, service restructuring. These plans will not only align the two organisations, but also create natural efficiencies and associated savings.

As an example, we are currently reviewing all the systems used in the Housing Directorate with a view to condense these as much as possible. For instance, the Resident portal with access to the Housing Management System and contractor system and all asset and tenancy information contained within one system.

In line with our Procurement Strategy, we follow UK government procurement rules (Public Contracts Regulations (2015)) for all purchases. These rules exist to ensure free and fair competition and transparency. We base procurement of our requirements on the principles of best value to ensure it achieves efficiency, effectiveness, and value for money. The Procurement Strategy is under review following updated regulations. Procurement statistics reported to CLT quarterly.

Internal Audit Progress Reports to the Audit, Governance and Appointments Committee, which is charged with providing independent assurance on risk management, assessing the authority's financial management and being responsible for general governance.

Recruitment is underway for the Appointment of an Independent Person at Audit committees. There will be focussed monitoring of audit recommendation completions and a Joint Internal Audit contract planned from April 2025.

Our Internal Auditor complies with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and gives assurance on the risk management and internal control processes in place in the Council to mitigate the risks identified.

- External Audit Update
- Annual Governance Statement

Council agrees a balanced budget and investment in services | Brentwood Council

Budget 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2024-29

Budget 2024/2025 and Medium Term Financial Strategy

Ordinary Council: Minutes Item 196 - Response to BBC Debt

Whilst the council has Equality and Diversity policies and procedures in place, the spend on activities related to them is minimal.

The council does employ occasional agency and consultants where we face recruitment issues or require specialist support for short term projects. The council is focussed on keeping this spend low and seeks alternative ways of working such as cross council partnerships, outsourcing and secondments.

Question 4: The barriers preventing progress the Government can help to reduce or remove

There are a number of barriers which Government can remove to support productivity for local authorities. Some examples are provided below:

Financial Uncertainty

- Officers are expected to do more than ever before, delivering more complex services with a reduced budget.
- Reduction in government funding means only the bare minimum capital improvements can be considered or completed.
- The current financial backdrop poses financial risks to the Council's budget. There are further financial risks to pay inflation forecasts as well as cost pressures from the current high rates of general inflation. The high inflation rates, increasing bank rates and national living wage pressure will have further impact onto ongoing budgets.
- The 2024/25 Financial Settlement was a one-year settlement, not reflecting the full MTFS period. The recent tendency towards one-year settlements makes financial planning extremely challenging – this undermines the council's ability to invest in services and in long-term place-shaping.
- The Government's calculation on core spending power assumes councils will increase council tax by 2.99%. Lower tier authorities are allowed to apply the higher of the referendum limit of 3% or £5. The

principle of a referendum limit undermines local democratic accountability. Additionally, upper-tier councils, the Police, Fire, and parishes have more relaxed rules for Council Tax increases.

- New Homes Bonus allocations have continued in 2024/25 for one year. The Government has signalled a review of the system of allocation for 2025/26 but without a new strategy, councils cannot plan to accommodate the financial benefits of housing growth.
- Apart from Government funding via the settlement, which is for one year only, councils have, in recent years, had to bid for a multiplicity of grants – sometimes within very tight timescales. This is resource-intensive and does not necessarily result in success. Even when it does, there continues to be an overhead to submit returns as well as conduct post-submission audits.
- The local external audit backlog needs to be addressed at a national level. The tentative plans for a backstop date for the audit of accounts up to and including 2022/23 have not been confirmed by Parliament. This leaves huge uncertainty for both external auditors and local councils. The extensive delay in external audits, largely due to the failure of the national system, undermines local transparency, the reputation of local councils' financial probity, and adds a substantial workload to officers. This has arisen through no fault of councils and has to be addressed.
- In addition to the external audit issues, the requirements of the Statement of Accounts are excessive, requiring a volume of work and detail that then needs to be audited, the majority of which is of little interest to the public. The Statement of Accounts requirements should be simplified to focus on the essentials to adequately report on financial stewardship in a form that the public can easily access.

Recruitment Issues

- General anxiety amongst housing professionals about how they will complete a professional qualification and how they will balance this with the ever-increasing demands of the day job. This anxiety is also resulting in officers deciding to leave the social housing industry which places additional pressure on existing resources and reduces productivity.
- The complexity of individual case management particularly around mental health and medical requirements and an ageing population is significant coupled with the lack of training and available resources and capacity in support agencies to confidently refer tenants into these services to get help.

National Government

- Government fiscal policy may potentially loosen at the same time as the Bank's monetary policy is still trying to take momentum out of the economy.
- Complicated, inconsistent, and misaligned processes for submitting data returns to central government.
- Lack of join-up between central government departments on issues including housing, homelessness prevention and asylum dispersal.
- Numerous statutory requirements to place notices in newspapers or issue written copies of routine notices.
- Excessive amount of information that is required in annual accounts or has to be published under the transparency code.
- Statutory overrides such as the requirement to value assets for accounts every year.
- Regulatory bodies seeking "to the letter" compliance with their statutory codes.
- We would also benefit from much greater flexibility for our council (and all councils) to decide how to raise and spend money locally. Central prescription and ringfencing constrain our ability to allocate our resources effectively.
- We have also been hampered by the tendency of Whitehall to design and decide policy that affects councils without engaging the sector as fully and as early as it could. This has resulted in initiatives and funds that are more complicated than necessary and that are difficult and, in some cases costly, for councils to implement. We strongly support much closer policy co-design between central government and local councils.

Housing

- Maintaining BBC's ambition to increase the supply of new, quality, affordable housing within the Borough. With current lack of funding, it is almost impossible to secure enough capital to maintain your existing stock and build more homes, this is true for the Council building direct, but also RP's who would provide the other main source of affordable homes within the borough.
- Securing Investment Partner Status (IPS) with Homes England. The Investment Partner Status application has been submitted but remains pending until a specific bid for grant funding has been submitted. Viability under current market conditions and Homes England Grant Level Awards. The SHDP requires revenue and capital resources from the HRA to deliver this programme. The finance structuring on each scheme is dependent on whether Homes England Grant Funding is applicable, whether any Section 106 is available

and if Retained Right to Buy Capital Receipts can be utilised. Any difference requires borrowing which incurs financing costs that are to be borne by the HRA.

- Rent caps have affected all services within the housing directorate. Higher increase in social rents to close the gap between market and social rent.
- Abolishing or remove Right to Buy discount to establish available social housing supply. The Right to Buy is reducing the amount of social housing assets available, not enough funding is available to build more social housing.
- More funding from government to fund innovative projects such as Net Zero or increase resources support residents in sustaining tenancy. Not able to meet Net Zero or retrofit targets, despite ambition to want to, due to lack of financial resources and increased cost of labour and materials in construction industry alongside lack of qualified staff to deliver these types of projects.
- Simplify process for applications for grant funding or different allocation of funding scheme. Complexity and financial commitment from smaller social housing landlords prevents interest and capacity to apply for government grant funding for energy efficiency programmes.
- Consider implementing of a shorter training course for those housing professionals who have worked in the industry for 10 years or more rather than the formal qualification route to retain good quality experience officers.
- Set more realistic timescales for implementation of any new legislative changes for all housing providers under stock size of <5000 where teams are smaller, and roles are more generic. Stability and time to allow officers to implement and bed in the recent legislative changes through the Building Safety Act 2022, Consumer Standards and Social Housing White Paper.

Planning

- The Council has a very small economic growth budget to support new business growth and development. Additional regular funding such as that which was secured through Levelling Up would be helpful in continuing to support business start-up and grow.
- OFLOG Proposed Metric: Gross Value Added per hour worked / Gross median weekly pay / Employment Rate 16 – 64. The Council can only play a very small part in influencing this area and continues to work with partners such as ECC, DWP and education providers to undertake this work. However, this is a non-statutory part of the Council's role and as such has limited funding and is a risk as Council budgets continue to be constrained. Making the service statutory and increasing funding available would be beneficial.

Kind regards.



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