

Bracknell Forest Council Productivity Plan

July 2024

1. Introduction

The requirement for productivity plans to be prepared by all local authorities was introduced as part of the Final Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/25. This document has been produced as mandated by the Minister for Local Government in his letter to Council Chief Executives on 16 April 2024, with responses to his suggested key lines of enquiry provided in sections 3 – 6 below.

2. Local context

Bracknell Forest Council is one of six unitary authorities created in 1998 when the former Berkshire County Council was abolished. Bracknell Forest has the smallest population of the six and is the fourth smallest unitary authority in mainland England.

The Council enjoys responsibility for the full range of local government services in the local area and has positive relations with its public sector partners, particularly in the NHS. This means that the Council is able to understand and be responsive to the specific needs of its residents and businesses in planning and delivering local services and infrastructure. Against that, there is limited capacity within the organisation's structure to deliver transformational change while at the same time maintaining a focus on delivering high quality, core services to benefit residents.

The Government's funding formulae, largely using 2011 census data, judge Bracknell Forest to be a prosperous area with generally low levels of deprivation and need. At the same time, the level of Council Tax set is in the lowest 10% of unitary authorities. As a consequence, the Council's core spending power per head of population is in the lowest quintile, 12% below the unitary average.

Data from the 2021 census shows that Bracknell Forest's population growth since 2011 was significantly higher (10.1%) than the England (6.6%) and South East (7.5%) averages. In addition, the proportion of older adults over 65 has risen much more rapidly than in other areas, which can be linked to the area's new town heritage.

An additional factor related to this is that much of the area's infrastructure was built in a relatively short period from the late 1950s to early 1970s. Around 60 years later, there is inevitably a peak in its deterioration which is placing significant pressure on the Council's capital budget and borrowing levels.

3. Bracknell Forest's approach to designing and delivering services to optimise use of resources

Bracknell Forest faced a position from 2010 – 2020 of rising demand for services, most notably adult social care, from its growing population at the same time as experiencing reduced Government funding due to austerity measures. The Council has continuously strived to identify efficiency savings since its creation and has delivered over £100m over the past 26 years. However, the particularly difficult and largely unexpected finance settlement for 2016/17 was the trigger for a different level of response.

In order to fulfil the statutory requirement of setting a balanced budget the Council initially approved a budget for 2016/17 supported by the use of £5.2m of general reserves. However, with available reserves at that time totalling less than £15m, it was recognised that this was not a sustainable position. Additional savings were quickly identified and a Transformation Programme was developed early in that financial year with a stretching target of identifying and delivering over £11m of recurring savings over a 3 year period. The approach taken was to adopt a robust commissioning cycle methodology that included identifying and exploring all available service delivery models.

The Council recognised at that time that it did not possess either the internal capacity or capability to undertake these in depth reviews. Specialist external expertise was therefore procured to help drive the programme, while a small in-house team was created to work alongside, support and learn from the external consultants. This additional resource was funded outside of the main budget, using reserves in an invest to save approach.

Work was completed on the 2016 Transformation Programme in 2019, by which point the target savings had been exceeded. A significantly different operating model was in place, including a rationalisation of the Council's property footprint, a centralised support services model with 10% savings, outsourcing of leisure management and divestment of non-core activities and assets.

Attention was turning to the next stage in the Council's transformation journey when Covid-19 disrupted normal operations in early 2020. Its investment in developing a skilled in-house team with project and change management expertise was invaluable in responding to the impacts of the Pandemic. The re-direction of this team did, however, result in a pause in the Council's broader transformation activities.

Recognising the need to re-stabilise the organisation following a lengthy period of national and global disruption, the new business change programme introduced in 2022 had a theme of securing "good quality, long-term sustainable services". It contained programmes and projects cutting across the organisation but with a particular focus on the People Directorate, with three key themes;

- Responding to major policy and legislation changes
- Addressing any serious service weaknesses
- Supporting the organisation to move towards long term financial sustainability.

With the budgets for 2022/23 and 2023/24 being significantly impacted by unprecedented inflationary and demand pressures, the need for savings to achieve a balanced position was higher than ever before. A total of £10m was identified across all service areas in these years alone, from a net revenue budget of £90m. With the impact of inflation in 2023/24 adding £10m to the Council's costs, it was necessary to draw almost £5m from the Council's reserves to achieve balanced budgets, even with the maximum Council Tax increase permitted.

Following the May 2023 local election, a process of insights collection, stakeholder engagement and feasibility testing in several phases was undertaken to develop a new Council Plan for the period to 2027 [Council Plan 2023 2027.pdf \(bracknell-forest.gov.uk\)](#). The Plan was agreed in November 2023 and sets out the overall ambition for what the Council aims to achieve for and with residents, businesses and partners.

The Council Plan's enabling priority to be an ambitious, resilient and sustainable organisation will be delivered in large part through the accompanying Business Change Programme. This will ensure the organisation is fit for the future and will drive savings and increased efficiency across all services as well as securing transformational change to benefit service users.

Five programmes of activity have been identified within the Programme, each of which has specific outcomes and measures;

- **Efficiency and digitisation** - delivering efficient, sustainable, innovative, digital enabled customer focussed services
- **Workforce, retention, and recruitment** - ensuring we have the right capabilities, retaining an engaged and motivated workforce and growing our own talent
- **Neighbourhood regeneration and assets** - building resilient communities and making best use of our property assets to support effective services and financial sustainability
- **Climate change** - enabling the organisation to achieve our climate change and carbon reduction goals
- **Corporate improvement** – an intensive corporate support and challenge programme to enable the turnaround of any service or function that has or is at risk of failure

The council has funded its work on transformation and business change in previous years from earmarked reserves. The scale of current and future pressures on the council's revenue finances, from rising costs and demand and more recently its participation in the Department for Education's Safety Valve programme, suggested that an alternative funding strategy should now be pursued.

The Council therefore adopted alongside the Council Plan a Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy [Bracknell Forest Council - Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy 191023.pdf \(bracknell-forest.gov.uk\)](https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/191023.pdf). Through this, the Council expects to realise income from selling capital assets of £4.4m over the period 2024/25 - 2026/27 that will be used to fund change activity securing service improvements and financial benefits totalling £9.2m over that same period. This follows the same invest to save principle that underpinned the 2016 Transformation Programme.

Alongside this, the Council will continue to seek efficiency savings in all service areas to ensure it is able to continue to set balanced budgets each year, while continuing to deliver good quality services for local people.

4. Bracknell Forest's plan to take advantage of technology and make use of data to support decision making, service design and use of resources

The Council recognises the benefits of digital transformation for service users and the organisation itself. Embracing digital technologies allows Bracknell Forest to gain insights into citizen needs, predict future trends, and adapt swiftly to changes, unlocking team efficiencies and providing seamless user experiences through intuitive interfaces.

Currently, three key projects are underway: a new corporate complaints system, a freedom of information system, and a case management system. In parallel, we are exploring opportunities for application rationalisation within our estate, aiming to streamline our corporate performance management system and enhance the disabled grant funding process. Committed to leveraging new technologies, we will soon test

Microsoft's artificial intelligence capabilities (Copilot) across the office suite to identify use cases that can improve efficiency and better align resources for frontline work.

Progress on delivery of the council plan priorities and the supporting business change programme is monitored and reported quarterly using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. This enables regular internal and external evaluation of the effectiveness of the Council's service design and resource allocation processes to deliver on its agreed priorities, highlighting risks and informing decisions to make changes where necessary.

5. What barriers exist that prevent progress in Bracknell Forest that the Government could help reduce or remove

The Government could assist local authorities by reducing the administrative burden it places upon them unnecessarily, enabling Bracknell Forest and all other councils to focus their resources on the efficient delivery of local services. Examples include further reductions to the number of different grant streams and the excessively bureaucratic processes needed to be followed around these. While this theme has been committed to in recent years, there is undoubtedly scope for Government to be more ambitious.

6. Bracknell Forest's plan to avoid wasteful spend within our organisation and systems

Bracknell Forest acknowledges that no organisation can ever be 100% efficient and there will always be opportunities to save money particularly through use of technology. However, the Council disputes the notion that there is widespread wasteful spend either locally or across the country.

Local authorities have continuously had to seek more efficient and less costly ways of delivering the important services residents rely on. Local government is widely acknowledged to be among the most efficient part of the public sector. Councils face a statutory duty to set a balanced budget every year, meaning there can be no scope for financial complacency.

Bracknell Forest is proud of its record of delivering value for money, good quality services that residents value. The Council invited the Local Government Association to undertake a corporate peer challenge review in November 2021. Among the review's conclusions were,

- "residents are consistently happy with the Council and its services",
- there is "awareness of the capacity of the organisation and the need to work with partners"
- the Council's political and managerial leadership "maintain a strong oversight of financial management"
- "financial risks are well understood with effective management and mitigations including transition plans for the use of reserves for that purpose"

The Council is well aware that it will need to continue to improve efficiency and productivity in response to rising service demand and increasing supplier costs and has plans in place to do so.