Dover District Council Productivity Plan

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

Flexible and dynamic leadership

1.1. Like many authorities, Dover has faced a number of challenges since 2020, but in particular, Dover has had to deal directly with the effects of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Dealing with DEFRA has created significant uncertainty so in 2022, to provide stability, we restructured our Corporate Management Team to a Chief Executive and three Strategic Director model. This Corporate Management Team delivers dynamic and informed delegated decision-making and leadership to the Council. Corporate Management Team meet weekly and with the Leader & Deputy Leader of the Council regularly to ensure clear coordination across the council.

1.2. The Corporate Management Team are supported by a number of Heads of Service, who are responsible for leading their services to ensure delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan.

Setting the strategic direction

1.3. Following a change of Political Leadership in May 2023, a revised Corporate Plan 2023-2027 was adopted in October 2023. The plan clearly articulates the strategic objectives of the council, setting a framework within which to design services and measure effectiveness. A new set of Strategic Performance Indicators are now being developed to measure productivity and effectiveness as well as our approach to Service Planning.

People management

1.4. To effectively manage pressure on expenditure and recruitment, and to ensure budgets are directed to the Council's priorities, the Council maintains a continuous "authority to recruit" process. The review team provides a "check and challenge" approach to all requests for workforce changes, including recruitment, restructuring and corporate training. The purpose is to ensure we continue to direct resources to areas which support the Councils Corporate Plan and Priorities, whilst maintaining budget discipline and supporting Governments initiatives i.e. Apprenticeships

1.5. The Council recognises and values our people as our biggest asset and has made significant improvements over the past few years on how we attract, retain and develop our people. It also drives cultural and organisational change, leadership, talent management along with continuous development of both our people and the organisation. Some initiatives which have been implemented:

- Implementation of a performance development mechanism. This helps the Council to understand the skills and aspirations of our workforce so learning and development initiatives can be directed appropriately, aiding retention.
- Senior Management training programme, which utilises funding from external sources and allows our Senior Leaders to learn from other organisations and bring change initiatives back to the Council.
- Introduction of new employee induction training and development of a new E-Learning system and "in-house" bitesize training sessions. All our new employees embark on induction training so from day one they understand the Councils priorities and ambitions. Further training can then be tailored as part of the induction process and ongoing performance development process.

1.6. In addition to focusing on performance and development the Council recognises that in a

competitive employment arena, where private sector companies can offer competitive salaries, to attract and retain our people we needed to go further and improve employee wellbeing and benefit offerings. The Council implemented has implemented a range of initiatives and is continually horizon scanning to realise new benefits for our people.

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

Digital Services Team

2.1. The Council has a dedicated Digital Services Team which shape and implement the Council's digital vision. The role of the service includes:
- Maintaining and developing the Council's websites to meet customer needs and deliver business objectives to change behaviours and achieve channel shift.
- Influencing the Council's approach to digital, using insight and analytics to understand the customer.
- Providing advice and guidance to ensure the Council's digital initiatives are aligned and customer focussed.
- Supporting departments in implementing new ways of working via digital reviews, to replace outdated legacy systems and processes.
- Responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of new and improved cost-effective ways of working and developing digital support services across the organisation.

2.2. Projects currently on the agenda include
- On-going Cloud development strategy.
- Implementation of a Customer Relationship Management system to improve customer access to online services.
- Refresh and redesign of the Council's main website.
- New income management system to deliver efficiencies in the processing of income streams.

2.3. All service requests for software or IT solutions are reviewed by the Digital Team, and considered by Corporate Management Team and Members, to improve use of data and understanding of customer needs in decision making.

Coordinating FOI requests, complaints and enquiries

2.4. A valuable source of information and data is the complaints and service requests from residents. Our intention is to streamline our FOI requests within the proposed CRM system, which will reduce time and resources spent on responding to routine requests and allows publication of FOIs (reducing duplicate enquiries).

3. **What are our plans to reduce wasteful spend within our organisation and systems?**

3.1. The council has one of the lowest Council Tax rates in Kent. A comparison with the East Kent authorities' 2023/24 Council Tax rates below shows the percentage that their 2023/24 Council Tax level exceeded DDC's and the extra income DDC would receive at their level of Council Tax:

	Band D Council Tax £	Difference to DDC %	Extra Income DDC would receive
Dover District Council	208.17	-	-
Canterbury City Council	232.92	11.89%	£989k
Folkestone and Hythe District Council	272.07	30.70%	£2.6m
Thanet District Council	255.54	22.76%	£1.9m

3.2. This reduced level of Council Tax income requires the council to be a small and lean organisation. We consider that any wasteful spend is too much and so strive to continuously look for opportunities to introduce efficiencies and alternative ways of delivering the important services we provide to the public.

3.3. We have a robust annual budget setting process which is carefully aligned to the Council's priorities. The budget setting process works alongside the measures outlined in our Annual Governance Statement as well as findings from individual audits and service reviews to ensure that our services are delivered effectively. We use robust budget setting and monitoring processes to identify and deliver savings.

3.4. We recognise that there are always opportunities for improvement, to continually review the work we do and to identify options to recoup costs where reasonable to do so.

3.5. The Council has allocated £600k in its 2024/25 budget for "Organisational Development" to support new projects that deliver efficiency savings and organisational change. This will be supported by a Continuous Improvement Manager, who will develop and implement a programme of service and efficiency reviews.

3.6. The council only undertakes spend on consultants and agency staff when essential due to a specific need for technical or professional advice on specific areas or projects. All requests for agency staff are considered by the Authority to Recruit group detailed above and procurement of consultants is undertaken in line with our procurement requirements.

3.7. The Council shares its office space with a number of other agencies including Kent Association of Local Councils and the NHS. This spreads the costs of maintaining the office with other agencies as well as providing beneficial collaborative working arrangements. The Council continues to explore opportunities to let out more of its accommodation whilst maintaining appropriate space for its staff and other building users.

3.8. We are currently reviewing our Asset Management Strategies (including condition surveys of our housing stock). This will help to inform a realistic longer term capital / revenue programme of maintenance spend on our property as well as reviewing opportunities for realising capital receipts from surplus assets to support financing of the capital programme.

4. **What are the barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove?**

Finance

4.1.   The most significant central barrier to local productivity is single-year finance settlements. Without a clear indication about funding for multiple years, councils cannot effectively plan and deploy their resources.

4.2.   We have been hampered by the tendency of Government 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.

4.3.   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.

4.4.   Uncertainty of government funding and grant allocations coupled with time limited grant allocations make long term budget planning almost impossible leading to short term solutions and lack of long-term investment in service improvement and transformation. The most significant issue is the uncertainty regarding the reset of localisation of business rate income which could create an additional funding deficit in excess of over £3.5m.

4.5.   The council tax referendum limit – the % increase allowed is not keeping pace with inflation meaning that savings have to be made to services just to stand still and the £5 cash limit is almost worthless to lower tier authorities as the annual % increase is in excess of that amount.

4.6.   Restrictions on the increase in certain fees and charges where efficiency savings result in a reduction in fee rather than the ability to raise additional income to support the wider council budget.

4.7.   Additional challenges including inflationary increases, higher energy costs and increases in National Living Wage continue to create a backdrop of uncertainty in terms of financial planning.

4.8.   Government support is needed to address the problem of cost shunting as a result of decisions taken by upper tier authorities that result in lower tier councils having to pick up the issue much further down the line, at which point it is often more reactive and therefore costly. Increasingly the budgetary position of Kent County Council is impacting those upper tier services delivered in our area. Bus routes, family hubs and youth services have all seen significant reductions in terms of delivery in the last year alone.

4.9.   There is lack of transparency of grant allocations – e.g. our recent DEFRA allocation to support food waste collections is considerably lower than the cost of implementation and is provided with no explanation of how the total funding was allocated.

4.10. We incur unnecessary spending and waste valuable officer time complying with rules, requirements, restrictions and processes imposed by central government and regulators. These include:

- An increase in competitive bidding between local government and other public services for funding. This is often overly complex and requires the use of consultants to meet the timescale and specialisms of the grant bid process. Not only does this take a lot of officer resource to navigate but it leads to a lack of cooperation between competing bodies as well as uncertainty in terms of service and project planning. This potentially leads to those with the best bid writers being awarded grant rather than most in need.

- Local Authority accounting and external audit requirements – simplifying the local authority framework could reduce the cost of delivery and create a system that is fit for purpose. The Redmond review findings have taken too long to deliver and do not go far enough. Requirements, e.g. the annual valuation of assets, are onerous, over audited and provide no useful information to local residents.

- The monitoring and reporting mechanism of many government grant allocations is onerous and not proportionate to the level of funding awarded – it also takes no account of the existing controls and audit processes in place for local government.

- The number of government returns that have to be completed on an annual basis, including the Revenue Outturn (RO), Revenue Account (RA) and Whole of Government Accounts, generate a significant use of resource that produces little benefit to local authorities. Completion is inconsistent across authorities, based on their accounting structures. There has also been an increase in the number of systems used for returns, which adds unnecessary complexity.

Housing and Homelessness

4.11. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) subsidy rate for temporary accommodation is currently set at January 2011 levels, this is unacceptable given requirement to use temporary accommodation and increased costs incurred by local councils. Supressing the subsidy to this rate does not impact on providers or support a reduction in demand, it places a huge burden on local authority budgets.

4.12. The restrictions and limitations of funding to support the delivery of affordable housing has meant that projects have failed to get off the ground.

4.13. The growth of the unregulated AirBNB sector, particularly in seaside towns like those within the Dover District, is pushing up private rental costs and availability. This is not reflected in LHA rates.

4.14. The low levels of LHA in the Dover district have a significant impact on the ability to deliver viable projects in the area and the lack of a route to effectively challenge the rates further restricts us in our development options, as well as creating significant challenges to residents in need of affordable housing in the district.

4.15. This adds to the pressure on the provision of affordable housing, creates further homelessness pressures and adds additional cost pressures to an already overburdened budget. Homelessness is the largest areas of budget pressure pressure faced by the council, and we have very little ability to influence or reduce the on-going stream of associated costs facing the council.

4.16. The requirement to pay the full charges for Housing Benefit to providers, but the limitations on reclaiming the costs on Supported Housing are further creating pressures on local authorities.

Processes and Transparency

4.17. Freedom of Information requests – many of the more burdensome and generic / cross authority requests received by the council are from journalists or researchers, or are looking for sales opportunities, and are not in the spirit of why the legislation was initially introduced. Much of the information requested is publicly available, and we waste resources pointing requestors to that information.

4.18. The excessive amount of information that is required to be published under the transparency code creates a burden on already stretched resources.

4.19. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation affects our ability to work effectively across services internally as well as with collaborating with partners to deliver better services to

the public and efficiency savings.

Port Health Authority & DEFRA

4.20. As the statutory Port Health Authority for the Port of Dover, the Council plays a crucial role in biosecurity for GB. Since the withdrawal from the European Union, DEFRA has subjected the Council to years of uncertainty and financial volatility, over and above that already created by local government funding arrangements. Amongst other things, this has involved a requirement to staff a team of up to 200, a requirement to reduce that team to 34 and a lack of commitment to fund crucial biosecurity checks for African Swine Fever, which poses a significant threat to the UK economy due to the risk of infected pork from the around the world.

Other

4.21. The evidence base required for the local plan, public enquiries and for planning applications & appeals necessitate the use of expensive consultants as authorities do not hold the bespoke expertise in house.

4.22. Continued uncertainty around the Waste Reform Act and the likely implications for waste collecting authorities create further challenges to future planning.

4.23. The restrictive rules with regards to the Apprenticeship Levy make it difficult to spend the levy on training and developing apprentices especially the requirement for 20% of the week is to be off the job training. It would be helpful if this requirement is in place for say 26 weeks of the year in line with most training courses and that on-the-job training supplements the development of apprentices for the remainder of the time