City of
Stoke-on-Trent

Improvement and Productivity Plan

Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2023-2027

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Executive Summary

The following document sets out the City of Stoke-on-Trent Improvement and Productivity Plan for the coming Medium Term Financial Strategy period. It outlines how the City Council intends to drive greater productivity across the range of services it provides to its residents and responds to the Minister for Local Government letter issued in April 2024.

For context, the City of Stoke-on-Trent:

- Is the largest city situated between the West Midlands and Greater Manchester conurbations
- It has a population of 258,000 (forecast to reach 265,000 by 2032)
- It is a polycentric city comprising the 'Six Towns' of Tunstall, Burslem, Stoke, Hanley (City Centre), Fenton and Longton
- It is the 14th most deprived of 317 local authority areas in England
- We have faced significant financial challenges for a number of years
- We face high and rapidly increasing levels of demand for personalised services such as social care, particularly children's social care
- We have worked hard to address the issues and challenges faced following the 2019 inadequate OfSTED judgement relating to Children's Social Care. Whilst, we are now judged to be 'requires improvement with good features', the legacy impact still places pressure on the council's financial position
- Significant demand challenges are also faced in relation Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) , homelessness and temporary accommodation, housing and public health inequalities
- We have low levels of financial resilience due to a weak council tax base (93% of properties fall within Bands A – C), historically low levels of reserves and low land values
- The Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA) estimated that the City Council's real terms change in spending power has been a reduction of approximately 26.9% since 2010 against an average reduction of 18%
- Based on these characteristics we effectively face a structural deficit in relation to Children's Social Care demand
- On this basis, alongside 19 other local authorities, we received Exceptional Financial Support of £42.2 million to enable it to set a balanced budget in 2023-24 and 2024-25

Work to Date

- We have had to continually review our financial position with circa £269m of budget reductions being delivered over the past 13 years
- We have undertaken an 'open book' approach in relation to oversight of its transformation and improvement work and invited and participated in a number of improvement-focused independent inspections by bodies such as the LGA, CIPFA, OfSTED, and a DfE Commissioner
- We have embedded a culture of learning and continuous improvement across all parts of the organisation with a focus on efficiency and improvement activities in our Operating Plans
- We have developed an ADAPT network to support staff and teams to develop a continuous improvement and efficiency culture across the organisation
- This has included developing a clear operating plan and framework, a range of new strategies, appropriate governance boards for key delivery areas, and annual assurance statements for senior officers, team plans and personal development plans for all staff
- We previously embarked on a major transformation programme with the aim of delivering improved services at lower cost; embedding a culture of continuous change as business as usual; and moving towards the city council becoming a learning organisation
- Significant benefits have also been delivered in terms of efficiencies in officer time and improved customer service, particularly in relation to digital transformation
- We further strengthened this by the creation of a Transformation Board, Transformation Assurance Group and Project Management Office and engaging a transformation partner
- As part of annual budget setting a range of proposals are identified for delivery over 1-3 years to provide service improvement and financial efficiencies including corporate cross-cutting projects that will ensure we have a sustainable platform for the medium term
- We regularly benchmark our performance and related costs of service delivery are undertaken to ensure we are providing value for money and identifying areas for improvement
- We have strong financial governance in place through our financial regulations and assurance requirements
- We review our key enabling functions, this has included recent reviews of both the commissioning, HR and procurement functions, to ensure that they are fit for purpose and able to support the council's strategic objectives

Future Plans

- We effectively face a continuing structural deficit in relation to Children's Social Care
- Our Exceptional Financial Support request therefore centred around medium-term investment in children's services, namely early help and early intervention and prevention, in order to keep children safe at home
- We initiated a range of external reviews prior to this request including by the LGA & CIPFA. The results of these reviews have been positive about the steps we are taking to address the challenges faced but recognise that a structural deficit exists and that a number of the interventions planned will take time to deliver financial savings and efficiencies
- It is clear that further phases of our improvement and productivity plans will need to be delivered alongside other interventions and measures to address the financial challenges
- We recently set out our new corporate vision entitled Our City, Our Wellbeing. This strategy represents a significant change of approach which is based around a fundamentally different relationship between the City Council and our residents
- It is about serving, supporting and enabling our citizens and communities, and responding to the genuine needs of residents of all ages a in more effective and financially sustainable way
- We are also embarking upon a hugely important transformation in the way that we approach some of our frontline services both to deliver improved outcomes and to achieve greater financial sustainability
- Working with our partners, including voluntary, community and faith organisations, we will invest in early support services, getting alongside people in their communities, giving them the tools to deal with the challenges they face
- We will make a deliberate and permanent shift towards investment upstream in activity that helps people to stay well, to develop themselves and to collaborate with others
- To implement this strategy the City Council is embarking on a number of major transformation programmes which are centred around an early intervention and preventative strengths based approach
- These key programmes include Children and Family Services, Family Support, Reviewing SEND Provision, Adult Social Care, Community Development, Leisure and Wellbeing Transformation, and Housing Improvement. The potential savings and cost avoidance forecasts relating to these areas are significant but it will take time to deliver and realise the financial benefits
- The City Council is also reviewing its enabling services such as the use of digital and asset management. We are due to refresh its Digital Strategy later this year. The current strategy aims to ensure we are continually developing our services through digital technologies to provide easy access for customers, improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the way we work and reduce digital poverty and exclusion. It will also look at how we can use AI to support improvements in workflow and analytics

National Context and Barriers Preventing Progress

- Whilst the City Council is committed to driving forward continuous improvement and productivity it is clear that urgent reform of how local government is funded is needed
- It is clear that the impact of de-industrialisation over a number of decades has been more severe for authorities like the City Council and exacerbates and compounds many of the challenges faced at a local level both in terms of the needs of the population, ill health, demand for services and the available resource of the council
- This makes the City Council's ability to invest in improvement and productivity from within its own resources more challenging than those local authorities who have less acute demands on their available resource, greater revenue raising opportunities, high land values and receipts and higher levels of historic reserves
- There are a range of barriers at a national level that make improvement and productivity more difficult
- These include local government funding which makes planning and resourcing difficult due to issues such as single year settlements, real terms funding cuts, and delays in fair funding. Alongside barriers which put additional burdens on limited resources such as extensive monitoring requirements and bidding processes
- In addition, barriers relating to social care challenges exist such as inadequate funding and resource for early intervention and preventative measures and the cost of residential placement for looked-after children and an unregulated social care market
- We feel that social work practice not in pursuance of the MacAlister review 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care' result in significant pressures within the care system
- We are therefore calling on government to urgently review local government funding and implement rapid reforms that will help stabilise the sector and outcomes for children
- We also agree with the proposals set out by SIGOMA in relation to local government funding reform and support the short, medium and long-term regarding stabilisation of immediate funding issues and longer term reviews of funding distribution and sustainability
- From a more detailed perspective we believe these reforms that should be considered include increasing the quantum of local government funding, multi-year settlements, greater grant flexibilities, regulating the social care markets, reviewing funding distributions including detaching business rates from local government funding, completing the fair funding review, reforming social care funding and reviewing and reforming council tax funding
- In addition to funding reform support to ensure that the skills and capacity exist within the employment market and sharing of such skills across government departments would support the removal and management of some of the recruitment and retention challenges faced within the sector
- Despite the positive steps we continue to take to deliver improvement and productivity without significant and rapid reform of local government, funding it is likely that a tool like Exceptional Financial Support will be required in order for us to deliver on the legal requirement to set a balanced budget due to the structural deficit faced

Wider Narrative

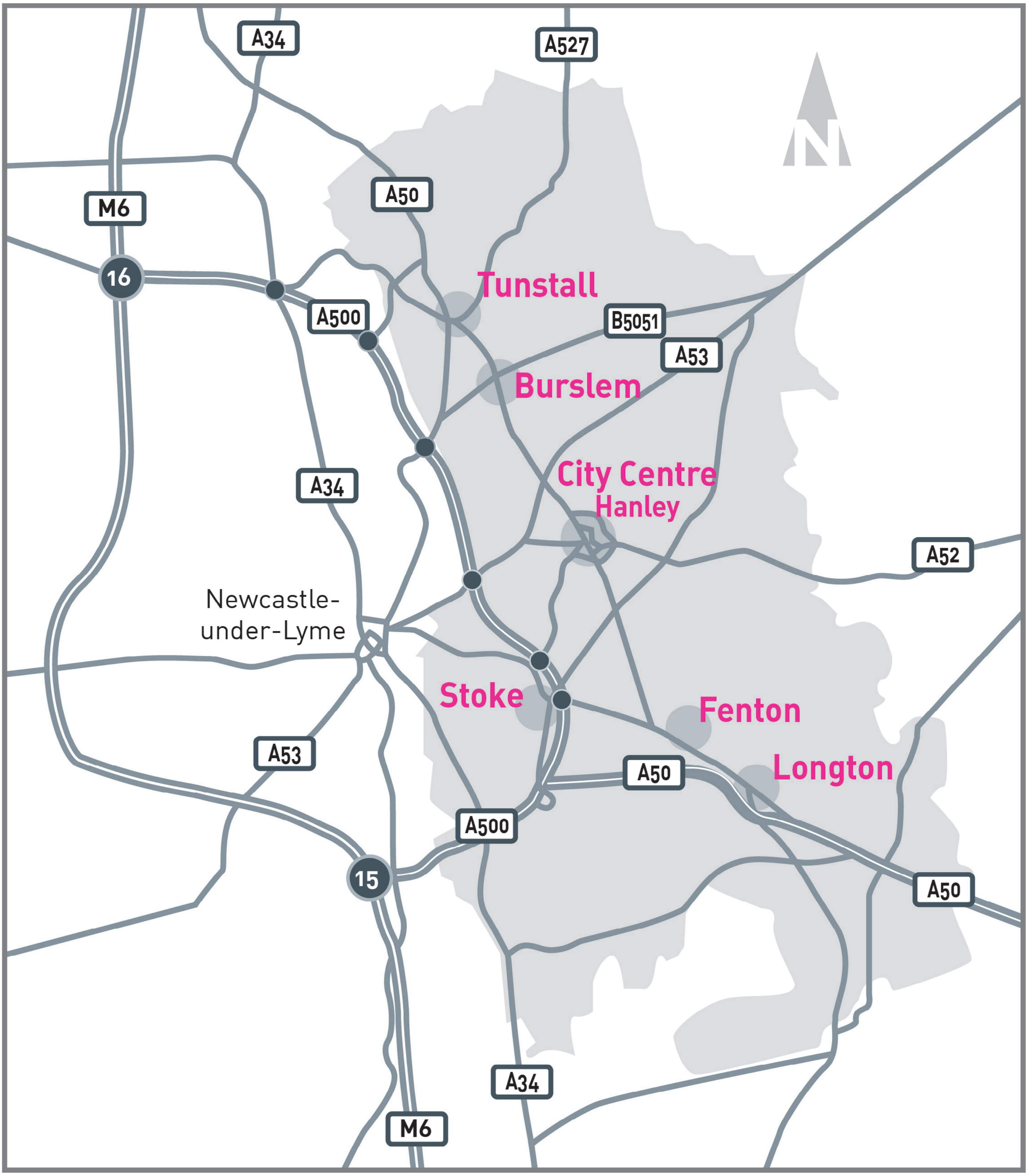
The following document sets out the City of Stoke-on-Trent Improvement and Productivity Plan for the coming Medium Term Financial Strategy period. It outlines how the City Council intends to drive greater productivity across the range of services it provides to its residents and responds to the Minister for Local Government letter issued in April 2024 which seeks to drive greater productivity across Local Government. In doing so the plan sets out in Appendix A the City Council's response to the specific questions posed by the Minister in relation to service design and delivery, use of technology and data, budget and spend, and barriers preventing progress.

Context

The City of Stoke-on-Trent is the largest city situated between the West Midlands and Greater Manchester conurbations. It has a population of 258,000 (forecast to reach 265,000 by 2032) and is a polycentric city comprising the 'Six Towns' of Tunstall, Burslem, Stoke, Hanley (City Centre), Fenton and Longton. It is the 14th most deprived of 317 local authority areas in England and is served by the M6 and West Coast Main Line, plus the A50 and the East-West rail corridor.

The City Council has faced significant financial challenges for a number of years due to the impact of national funding reductions, rapidly increasing levels of demand for personalised services such as social care, and low levels of financial resilience due to a relatively weak council tax base (93% of properties fall within Bands A – C) and low levels of reserves.
Based on recent studies by the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA) it estimated that the City Council's real terms change in spending power has been a reduction of approximately 26.9% since 2010. Over this period the City Council has worked hard to ensure that it has delivered a balanced budget each year and has developed and maintained a Medium-Term Financial Strategy that delivered the necessary savings or additional income required to address the financial challenges faced and aimed to build on the low levels of financial resilience. For context the City Council has delivered annual average savings of £21m per year (circa £269m) over the last 13 years.

Due to continuing increases in demand for services, the long-term impact of the recent inflationary pressures and the uncertainty regarding future funding the City Council will continue to face significant financial challenges over the medium term. It is therefore important we continue to progress and extend the positive work that has been undertaken to date to deliver improvement and productivity across the council. It is critical we continue to ensure that we work with our partners and residents to deliver value for money services across the public sector within the resources available. The City Council's recently published Our City, Our Wellbeing strategy therefore seeks to adopt a radical and different approach, based on community-led development of prevention, support and enterprise activity.



City of Stoke-on-Trent map showing the location of the six towns

Improvement and Productivity Work to Date

Embedding a culture of learning and continuous improvement across all parts of the organisation was one of the aims of the previous Stronger Together Strategic Vision and was further strengthened by the focus on efficiency and improvement and enabling activities in the Operating Plans that were introduced in 2020. The council has developed an ADAPT network to support staff and teams to develop a continuous improvement and efficiency culture across the organisation. The City Council has undertaken an 'open book' approach in relation to oversight of its transformation and improvement work by DHLUC and has invited and participated in a number of improvement-focused independent inspections and reviews during 2022 and 2023, including for example an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, CIPFA Financial Review and various Ofsted inspections. The feedback from these reviews have been positive about the vision and the approach of the City Council to addressing the challenges faced. The City Council has implemented a significant and wide-ranging number of governance and performance improvements over recent years. This has included developing a clear operating plan and framework, a range of new strategies, appropriate governance boards for key delivery areas, and annual assurance statements for senior officers, team plans and personal development plans for all staff, all of which help to drive forward the improvement agenda across the council. We have included a range of case studies across this plan to highlight the positive steps we have taken to deliver improvements in a variety of areas.

From a financial and productivity perspective, due to the significant financial challenges set out in the context section of this document, the City Council has had to continually review its financial position and has a good record of delivering savings and efficiencies with circa £269m of budget reductions being delivered over the past 13 years. These savings and reductions have included service efficiencies (£98m); redesigning and transforming services to improve the customer experience (£86m); reviewing fees and charges / other income (£33m); driving greater value from buying (£23m); workforce changes (£23m); and asset rationalisation (£6m). The City Council's savings strategy has involved a combination of simultaneous and linked approaches: addressing in-year and forecast demand and cost pressures (e.g. through financial controls); achieving planned savings identified in the budget; delivering a major transformation programme aimed at providing improved services at lower cost.

Over previous years the City Council has embarked on a major transformation programme with the aim of delivering improved services at lower cost; embedding a culture of continuous change as business as usual; and moving towards the city council becoming a learning organisation. Significant benefits have also been delivered in terms of efficiencies in officer time and improved customer service, particularly in relation to digital transformation. The focus on transformation was further strengthened by the creation of a Transformation Board, Transformation Assurance Group and Project Management Office. The City Council also engaged Grant Thornton as a transformation partner to provide additional capacity and external challenge and perspective. Progress is assessed through relevant transformation boards and processes, which examines whether sufficient transformation resources are budgeted to achieve sustainable change in key target areas. In terms of approach three types of transformation savings are developed: efficiency and productivity proposals agreed as part of annual budget setting; proposals identified for delivery over 1-3 years to provide service improvement and financial efficiencies; corporate cross-cutting projects that will ensure that the council has a sustainable platform for effective stewardship into the medium term. Regular benchmarking of our performance and related costs of service delivery are undertaken to ensure we are providing value for money and identifying areas for improvement.

In addition to focusing on the delivery of the transformation programme, the City Council also undertakes reviews of the key enabling functions, this has included recent reviews of both the commissioning, HR and procurement functions, to ensure that they are fit for purpose and able to support the council's strategic objectives. Changes to the Commissioning structure and function have also been implemented. The procurement review has more recently been completed and changes are in the process of being implemented.

Jobs, Enterprise and Training Service
Empowering Futures, One Opportunity at a Time

Over recent years, the council has led employment support initiatives as part of our strategy to address worklessness across the area. Our Jobs, Enterprise and Training service (JET) has been a key provider of the Restart Scheme and has established a community-based support tailored for economically inactive residents, funded via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, ensuring that assistance is provided in the right place at the right time.

Our ultimate goal is to create a dynamic and adaptive employment support system that is inclusive and stigma-free. By harnessing a broad range of expertise and focusing on local requirements, our JET service provides substantial advantages to our communities and businesses.

We actively engage with residents, crafting tailored solutions to tackle employment issues and offering personalised guidance and support. This approach is further strengthened through strategic and operational partnerships with various local organisations to ensure optimal results.

Since June 2021, the JET service has supported over 1650 local residents back into employment.

Our initiatives contribute to the reduction of unemployment rates and actively prevent newly unemployed individuals from becoming long-term unemployed and / or Economically Inactive. Sustained efforts through partnerships with local and regional entities, including the NHS, Integrated Care Boards, and neighbouring local authorities, will ensure the longevity and effectiveness of our programs.

We estimate that we will be able to support even more local residents back into employment and improve their overall quality of life.

Improvement and Productivity Future Plans

Despite the work undertaken by the City Council over recent years to drive improvement and productivity and the delivery of significant financial savings due to the challenges the council faces in relation to social care demand, a weak council tax base and delays in the long mooted national fair funding reform for local government we effectively face a continuing structural deficit in relation to our financial position. De-industrialisation and the legacy impact of ‘pits and pots’ (the mining and pottery industry) on ill-health and the drag this has on the local economy also has a significant impact on the demand for services and the costs the council faces. Due to these specific characteristics the City Council has faced a stiff financial challenge since its inception and has “bumped along the bottom financially” so to speak but has taken the difficult steps required to manage this low financial resilience and deliver a balanced budget each year. Unfortunately, the significant and specific pressures arising from Children’s Social Care in the face of high levels of demand alongside the lack of a fair funding formula that reflects need and the post COVID environment in which we are operating took us over the edge and it would not have been possible to deliver a balanced budget over the current period without cutting a range of services that would have had a profound impact on civic life. Effectively the City Council currently faces a structural deficit in relation to Children’s Social Care.

On this basis the City Council, alongside 19 other local authorities, recently submitted a request for Exceptional Financial Support of £42.2 million to enable the council to set a balanced budget. This application was approved by central government with the Exceptional Financial Support covering two years, £20.5 million in 2023/24 and £21.7 million in 2024/25. This support is in the form of a Capitalisation Direction permitting the council to borrow capital and use it to fund revenue costs, which would not ordinarily be permitted under accounting rules. This borrowing, plus interest, must then be paid back using the receipts from the sale of council owned assets. The EFS request centred around medium-term investment in children’s services, namely early help and early intervention, in order to reduce the number of children entering into care. The request also pursued support for the acute pressures arising from children’s placements and for transformational investment to return the council to a sustainable footing. Whilst central government would be granting us special permission to borrow, it is important to note the city council would still essentially be using its own resources to address the challenges faced.

As set out above the City Council initiated a range of external reviews prior to the Exceptional Financial Support request. This specifically included a financial review by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance, an LGA Peer review relating to Children’s Social Care Resources, and an Adult Social Care Use of Resources Review. The results of these reviews have been positive about the steps the City Council is taking to address the challenges faced but recognise that a structural deficit exists and that a number of the interventions planned will take time to deliver financial savings and efficiencies. These reviews have been presented to the relevant committees including Cabinet, Audit, and Overview and Scrutiny. In addition, the City Council has also recently appointed an Independent Financial Improvement Advisor to ensure there is ongoing independent scrutiny and challenge of the steps the council is taking to improvement its financial position.

Beyond 2024-25 a significant financial gap remains within the projected Medium Term Financial Strategy (Appendix B), and it is clear that further phases of our improvement and productivity plans will need to be delivered alongside other interventions and measures to address the financial challenges. The 2024/25 financial year will therefore be a vitally important one for the City Council for a number of reasons. As set out above, the authority is led by a new political administration elected in May 2023 and has developed a brand-new Corporate Strategy. Our City, Our Wellbeing is a very different strategy to its predecessor and represents a significant change of approach which is based around a fundamentally different relationship between the City Council and our residents. It is about serving, supporting and enabling our citizens and communities, and responding to the genuine needs of residents of all ages in more effective and financially sustainable ways. The Corporate Strategy is a blueprint for transformation in the way that local government works – it makes the case for adopting new ways of working and of thinking about our core purpose and objectives.

This crucial transition away from the traditional approach of ‘doing to’ and ‘delivery’ towards more ‘doing with’ and ‘enabling’ will require an equally fundamental shift in the culture of our organisation in order to achieve the challenging priorities and goals contained in the Corporate Strategy. Partnership working, collaboration, co-design and the establishment of empowered, influential networks around thematic issues will become increasingly important elements of our day-to-day work. We will embrace situations which are characterised by uncertainty, in which we won’t have all of the answers or resources required to ‘solve’ key problems. By evolving to become a learning organisation, we will pool knowledge and expertise in order to co-design more effective approaches and solutions with our partners and the residents and communities we exist to serve. This cultural shift towards becoming a more outward-facing, collaborative organisation is reflected in our new corporate values and the choice of measures by which we will gauge future progress.

As part of this process of organisational change, we are also embarking upon a hugely important transformation in the way that we approach some of our frontline services both to deliver improved outcomes and to achieve greater financial sustainability. Working with our partners, including voluntary, community and faith organisations, we will invest in early support services, getting alongside people in their communities, giving them the tools to deal with the challenges they face. We will make a deliberate and permanent shift towards investment upstream in activity that helps people to stay well, to develop themselves and to collaborate with others. This will require us to adopt the perspective of understanding the strengths of people and communities, rather than just seeing their needs. We will need to give some of our powers and resources away in order to make community development work and build greater resilience in disadvantaged neighbourhoods throughout our city. By working in this way, and involving trusted local organisations who know their communities, we can enable people to develop better solutions to their problems, and ultimately prevent crises from occurring. To implement this strategy the City Council is embarking on a number of major transformation programmes. This includes key programmes within Children’s and Adult Social Care as well as key corporate projects focussed on digital solutions.

The Children's Improvement plan is aimed at reducing the number of children in care by keeping them safe at home and lowering expenditure on external residential placements through investment in early intervention and prevention, as well as work to improve placement sufficiency through the establishment of a Placement Review and Delivery Board chaired by the City Director. Our overall aim is to implement an approach that builds on the MacAlister review "Independent Review of Children's Social Care", with which the Council substantially agrees and supports. Our aim is to develop a true family first model which recognises that for a large majority of children in need, their best prospects and best future outcomes lie within their own family context, provided the family can be supported to deal with the issues that are causing risk to that child or young person. As part of the Exceptional Financial Support request the City Council has looked to work with central government on this transformation and to develop a partnership and construct a multi-year deal to enable the Council to build back an effective prevention and early help system for families, and to undertake targeted work to reduce the numbers already in care, thus being able to manage down the structural deficit being caused by the level of crisis activity in the system. Over time this will aim to bring the local children's social care system back into structural balance and provide sustainability for the future. The aim of the intervention programme would be to invest more heavily in the prevention and early help support programmes to reduce the number of children coming into care, as well as generating more opportunities for looked-after children to live successfully at home or under kinship arrangements or special guardianship status. We would also accelerate work to develop long-term relationships with local residential providers as well as expanding our own provision.

As part of the Exceptional Financial Support submission to central government we set out a credible plan based on an analysis of rate of progress in other geographies that have affected this type of turn-around, and our judgement was that with this concerted investment and effort, the structural deficit on children's social care that we face could be eliminated within 5 years. The table below sets out the estimated trajectory and investment requirements over this period. Understandably, due to the pending General Election we were only able to secure a two year Exceptional Financial Support agreement, however, unless there is very rapid action at a national level to address the local government fair funding formula and in particular ensure there is adequate funding for Children's Social Care which is reflective of need, we have always been clear it is very likely further financial support would be needed to traverse the remaining years of the 5 year plan.

The council is undertaking a three-year transformation programme of its Adult Social Care services to improve outcomes and reduce demand for care services: Stronger focus on early intervention and prevention; Improved quality of practice to manage risk and safeguard residents; Seamless co-ordination of care and support resulting from integrated assessments and case management with partner agencies; Development of a market which offers choice for the resident and value for money to the tax payer; Responsive and integrated models to avoid admissions to hospital and support timely and safe discharges; a workforce development plan that promotes innovative (including digital) practice.

In addition to the transformation of services in key areas of demand the City Council is committed to wider cross cutting transformation across the council including areas such as digital and asset management that will look to improvement the customer experience and drive efficiency through the use of technology. A range of transformation programmes are in progress across the council across both in terms of direct service provision and enabling services and include for example addressing budget pressures in relation to SEND service provision without compromising quality; delivering the Public Health Transformation Programme; and a review of our housing offer. Due to the scale of these programmes further detail is provided below.

Due to significant increases in the demand, complexity and nature of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Alternative Education Provision (AP) over recent years, alongside changes in national policy and related funding allocations the sector is facing a very significant financial deficit in this area at a national level. The City Council, like the vast majority of councils across the country, is therefore facing a significant financial deficit in relation to its High Needs budgets. The City Council agreed an initial recovery plan with the Department for Education in 2020 as part of the national Safety Valve Programme. This recovery plan aimed to improve the provision and support offered to pupils with SEN or AP needs, whilst, addressing and reducing the financial deficit. A range of measures were included in the plan which were principally aimed at supporting and driving schools in Stoke-on-Trent to meet a higher level of need in a more cost effective way within mainstream settings, while maintaining the quality of provision, and reducing the authority's use of independent school places by increasing the availability and suitability of local provision. This has included the review of the 'Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) offer' and developing a Graduated Approach to help schools to support children and young people without an EHCP, developing and building new provision within the city, and reforming commissioning practices to address sufficiency problems. To date the City Council has progressed well with this plan reducing the original deficit position, including DfE support, from circa £21m to £12m at the end of 2023-24. This reduction is despite trends at a national level moving in the opposite direction during this period. Whilst there has been positive progress to date, in line with national trends, there has been a significant increase in the number of new EHCP plans, mainstream to ISP transfers and permanent exclusion numbers during 2023-24 which have impacted future projections. The City Council is currently in discussions with the DfE regarding a realignment of the planned timeframe for the deficit recovery. This realignment will include the next phase of our improvement journey which will look to develop a locality-based model which would involve schools being organised into clusters which are geographically aligned to the Family Hubs within the city and support all partners working collaboratively, to improve outcomes for all pupils in their local cluster. It should also be noted the current national position relating to high needs funding and the use of a statutory override to enable the deficit to be carried on council's balance sheets remains a significant financial risk to the local government sector and the City Council. The City Council is therefore calling on government to rapidly develop a national solution that removes this risk from councils and local taxpayers.

In terms of housing improvement, a review and delivery of key priorities within the 2022-27 Housing Strategy, will be undertaken in the coming period with a particular focus on: driving economic success and widening housing choice, developing a council offer that meets residents needs, improving the city's private rented stock, and will include maintaining a focus on treating and preventing damp and mould across all housing stock. Alongside this a review of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy in order to ensure all relevant agencies are working together effectively to prevent and relieve Homelessness and ensure Rough Sleeping is rare, brief and non-recurring will also take place.

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The key aim of the Public Health transformation programme is to develop the team and services to have the greatest impact on wellbeing for the City, as well as reduce inequalities. This includes the review of a range of programmes and services i.e. tobacco, sexual health, health visiting and pivoting our traditional leisure offer to a community based leisure and wellbeing service. The Public Health specialist workforce transformation is about building in the right capability and capacity to meet the changing needs of the City's population to improve wellbeing. All of these initiatives will drive improvements in the services we offer residents whilst driving productivity and efficiency in the way in which these services are provided.

Changing Futures Programme
Improving outcomes for adults experiencing multiple disadvantage

Over the last 18 months the council has established 18 community lounges as part of the Communities Together Strategy using resources across all sectors including; voluntary and community sector, police, fire service, primary care, churches, individuals from communities and private sector MPFUT. We have established 5 Innovation Teams to shape and deploy solution-based support.

The aim of this is to provide a multi-disciplinary, responsive, personalised, flexible and stigma free access point, which is achieved by bringing in a wide range of expertise as locality specific needs are identified.

Community Lounges add value to our local communities, via our Locality Connectors listening to what local people need and by building the services holistically around them to solve place-based issues, provide person-centred support, guidance and care.

We have seen vast improvements as a result leading to reductions in care needs escalating. Between February 2023 and February 2024 there has been over 2500 visits to our community lounges.

Each community lounge is unique and provides services tailored to the needs of the specific local community based on data and insight. We have established 5 innovation teams whose role is to shape and deploy solution-based supports and the support of a commissioner ensures we are providing value for money and effective services for our residents.

We estimate that these will prevent care needs escalating, get support to where it is needed and ensure that residents can access services more quickly whilst delivering financial benefits and efficiencies. This is the next step on our journey to co-developed and co-delivered provision of local services.

Homelessness Prevention
Preventing and Relieving Homelessness

Over the last 18 months, the Council received 3007 homelessness enquiries and accepted 2,282 new homelessness duties. To reduce these numbers the council has placed a significant focus on preventing and relieving homelessness in the city.

Our aim is to support residents to maintain and sustain their tenancies or owner occupation and work with families and young people to prevent homelessness occurring in households. We have developed a range of interventions to support the reduction of initial homelessness enquiries and homelessness duties placed on the local authority.

This has included housing related support projects, which provides targeted provision to prevent the loss of tenancies in supported housing and via floating support in dispersed accommodation across the city.

In the current climate, financial resilience is an issue in maintaining accommodation and a city-wide advice service has been implemented, which is being delivered by the Citizens Advice Bureau, providing money; debt and welfare benefits advice as well as independent housing advice. A recently introduced Bond Scheme is providing help to individuals to secure private rented sector accommodation where appropriate.

We have introduced a young persons mediation service which has a purpose of helping to rebuild positive family relationships and prevent relationship breakdowns and a hardship fund is available to provide small amounts of funding that can be used in a range of circumstances to prevent homelessness.

Over the last 18 months, we have seen our efforts on prevention deliver some tangible results, the Council closed 1,868 cases with a positive outcome for 1,708 (91%) compared to a national average of 44%. This has placed the Council in the top 5 performing authorities in England for homeless prevention.

We estimate that this trajectory will continue and the financial savings from the prevention agenda and avoidance of statutory homeless duties on the council will increase.

Barriers to Improvement and The National Context

Whilst the City Council is committed to driving forward continuous improvement and productivity it is clear that urgent reform of how local government is funded is also needed and is now long overdue. Since 2010, local government has experienced the largest budgets cuts in the public sector, experiencing an 18.1% real terms cut to their spending power up to 2024-25. This figure is even greater for more deprived authorities, Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA) members have seen an average real terms cut of 23.3% since 2010-11. Although, all types of Local Authority face significant financial challenges the immediate risks to a number of local authorities are more significant due to their specific characteristics. These include high levels of deprivation and high demand for services such as social care, a weak council tax base, low levels of reserves and low land values. This is the case for the City Council with a real terms cut in spending power of 26.9% being experienced since 2010-11.

It is clear that the impact of de-industrialisation over a number of decades has been more severe for these types of authority and exacerbates and compounds many of the challenges faced at a local level both in terms of the needs and health of the population, demand for services and the available resource of the council. The City Council has therefore struggled financially more or less since its creation, with consistently low reserves and very limited means to generate additional income. The Council owns relatively little land of high value, and its business rate base grows slowly. While the Council has a strong track record of delivering new housing on brownfield land, this is offset by numbers of empty properties, meaning that there has been little benefit from New Homes Bonus. Almost all regeneration activity in the city is reliant on public subsidy. In terms of the low levels of reserves held this presents a risk to the overall financial resilience of the City Council and the ability to deal with unexpected financial events. We have worked hard and taken difficult decisions over recent years to increase the reserves held to the minimum level required of circa 5%. This makes the City Council’s ability to invest in improvement and productivity from within its own resources more challenging than those local authorities who have less acute demands on their available resource, greater revenue raising opportunities, high land values and receipts and higher levels of historic reserves.

The City Council is therefore calling on government to urgently review local government funding and implement rapid reforms that will help stabilise the sector. These reforms should include increasing the quantum of local government funding, multi-year settlements, greater grant flexibilities, regulating the social care markets, reviewing funding distributions including detaching business rates form local government funding, completing the fair funding review, reforming social care funding and reviewing and reforming council tax funding. In addition, we are asking the government to set out a commitment to broadly implement the findings of the MacAlister review “Independent Review of Children’s Social Care” and ensure that social work practice is conducted in pursuance of the principles outlined in the MacAlister review.

Despite, the positive steps being taken by the City Council to deliver improvement and productivity over the coming period without significant and rapid reform of local government funding it is likely a tool similar to Exceptional Financial Support, will be required over the coming period to ensure local authorities facing similar challenges to the City Council will be able to deliver on their legal requirement to set a balanced budget.

Community Lounges Programme
Utilising place-based resources to provide the right support in the right place and at the right time

Over the last 18 months the council has established 18 community lounges as part of the Communities Together Strategy using resources across all sectors including; voluntary and community sector, police, fire service, primary care, churches, individuals from communities and private sector MPFUT. We have established 5 Innovation Teams to shape and deploy solution-based support.

The aim of this is to provide a multi-disciplinary, responsive, personalised, flexible and stigma free access point, which is achieved by bringing in a wide range of expertise as locality specific needs are identified.

Community Lounges add value to our local communities, via our Locality Connectors listening to what local people need and by building the services holistically around them to solve place-based issues, provide person-centred support, guidance and care.

We have seen vast improvements as a result leading to reductions in care needs escalating. Between February 2023 and February 2024 there has been over 2500 visits to our community lounges.

Each community lounge is unique and provides services tailored to the needs of the specific local community based on data and insight. We have established 5 innovation teams whose role is to shape and deploy solution-based supports and the support of a commissioner ensures we are providing value for money and effective services for our residents.

We estimate that these will prevent care needs escalating, get support to where it is needed and ensure that residents can access services more quickly whilst delivering financial benefits and efficiencies. This is the next step on our journey to co-developed and co-delivered provision of local services.

Catalyst Project
Supporting children to remain with their families

Over the last 18 months, as part of a Department for Education sector-led improvement programme looking at creating a No Wrong Door team in Stoke-on-Trent, we have developed the catalyst project.

What has been created is a multi-agency specialist family and adolescent support team (FAST), working with children on the edge of care to provide rounded support to children and their families. Initially started as a pilot, following agreement from all engaged partners the project has continued into 2024/25.

The aim of the project is to protect children from harm, while ensuring that they remain at home, where this is in their best interests. Some children are already looked after when referred into the project and the goal of intervention is to stabilise a placement at risk of breaking down, but for most children, the goal of support is that they do not become looked after and continue living at home safely. The multi-agency FAST support team has evolved to consist of support workers, a part-time virtual school practitioner and a police officer.

We have seen vast improvements in ensuring children remain at home, with 87% of children within this project remaining with their families and avoiding significant placement costs.

Additional benefits have included 21 children being assessed by speech and language therapy with direct support provided to over 33% who required intervention, missing episodes for children reducing from an average of 5 per month in the first quarter of 2023/24 to one episode only in the whole of quarter 3.

This approach to supporting children to remain with their families and out of care will not only result in improved outcomes for children including educational support and more children remaining in school places but also deliver financial efficiencies and result in significant cost avoidance relating to high cost placements.

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