Sefton Council Productivity Plan 2024

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Distribution

Leader of the Council
Cabinet Member – Corporate Resources and Customer Services
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Introduction

This is Sefton Council's response to the request received from Simon Hoare MP (Minister for Local Government) on the 16th of April 2024, to set out what the Council has done in recent years, alongside its current plans, to transform the organisation services. Member oversight and endorsement of the plan has been provided by the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, in advance of the report being shared with the Cabinet on the 25th of July 2024.

Section 1

How has the Council transformed the way it designs and delivers services to make better use of resources?

Sefton Council remains ambitious for our residents, communities, businesses, and our workforce. Like many Councils, Sefton Council has been impacted by unprecedented reductions in settlement funding from Government between 2010/11 and 2019/20 (£95m / 51%) and therefore had to deliver significant savings and efficiencies and become more productive in response to the reduction in financial resources. This has been achieved through a major strategic shift as the Council has transformed service design and delivery, using its resources effectively and increasing productivity. The process of developing our [Corporate Plan](#) consulting with our communities to establish a clear [vision](#), prioritizing our [core purpose](#), reinforcing our [Council values](#), aligning this to our medium term [revenue and capital budget plan](#), and [managing performance](#), enables us to work towards clearly defined strategic ambitions within the funding that is available to the authority.

Consequently, the Council made difficult decisions to deliver savings (e.g. traditional back-office functions, and areas where there is a statutory requirement for Councils to provide services but the level of service is discretionary, such as libraries) and increase productivity in higher-priority areas (Children's Services, Adult Social Care and Community Services), which included significant changes to the organizational structure and capacity across all levels of the organization.

Some of the discretionary services, which continue to be provided because the Council recognizes the immense value of these services to its community's health and wellbeing, have moved to operate within a 'self-financing' envelope, such as the Council-run leisure facilities (swimming pools, gyms, football pitches and sports halls). Furthermore, the Council has developed income recovery through traded service agreements with the schools.

The Council is committed to remaining ambitious, community focused, and operating under the principles of high-challenge & high-support as evidenced through the Annual Governance Statement and the Corporate Peer Challenge. The Council is currently reviewing its Corporate Plan for 2025 and beyond (will recommendations going to Cabinet in July 2024), reflecting on what it has achieved, its forward priorities and the outcomes based measurable performance metrics (including OFLOG indicators) that it will use to demonstrate positive impact across a range of areas. This Council priorities are ambitious and include improving outcomes for children and their families, improving the health & wellbeing of its residents, empowering people live independently, working together to

deliver affordable services, which achieve the best possible outcomes for our communities, creating more and better jobs for local people, and importantly maintaining financial sustainability.

The Corporate Plan, which identifies the corporate priorities to achieve the Council ambitions, is clearly aligned to its Medium-Term Financial Plan, Service Plans and Transformation Plan, which ensures that the Council has the resources to deliver continuous improvement and change its core services, and progress is reported through KPIs that are reported to Cabinet on a quarterly basis.

The Council has developed its Transformation Programme 2024, which will support delivery of the Corporate Plan, and will also be the vehicle to deliver financial sustainability. The four pillars of its transformation plan include:
- Everyday excellence (continuous improvement in service delivery and support)
- Growth (redefining Sefton place through town deal and levelling up allocations)
- Setting us up to succeed (improved infrastructure for the corporate landlord function, performance management, workforce development, commissioning, and contract management)
- Better outcomes and sustainable services (transformational change to SEND, Home to School transport, Children's Social Care, Better at Home Adult Social Care and Housing).

The five projects under the pillar of 'better outcomes and sustainable services' address 75% of the Council spend; reducing revenue costs and improving outcomes, will improve productivity for that 75%. The Council is committed to investment in the medium term to deliver those projects (for example in Council housing, temporary accommodation, extra care housing, support living, SEND provision, home to school transport), and investment for the long term growth in place through levelling up and Towns deal projects.

Alongside the £37.5m in government funding for a range of exciting projects across Southport town centre and sea front, the Council and Liverpool City Regional combined authority is investing a total of £73m capital finance to drive the economic regeneration of Southport to deliver long-term productivity growth and a resilient economy, so that Southport will be a thriving place for people to live and work. The Council also has ambitious plans and has committed further capital finance alongside levelling up funding for place regeneration of Bootle town centre, allocating space for education, health and social care uses, an enhanced leisure and hospitality offer, and community, cultural and creative spaces, plus significant investment in the economic development and civic infrastructure in Crosby village.

Given the continuing pressures on Council funding, these investments will need to be partially be funded by the delivery of further short term improvements in the efficiency of council services, generating savings through the redesign of the Adult Social Care, managing a reduction of residential placements for cared for children, reducing the use of independent schools for SEN provision, and consequently the demand for specialist home to school transport, the continued review and reduction in the use of agency staff across the workforce, particularly in the area of children's services.

The synergistic approach of joining corporate planning with the delivery of corporate service objectives and transformation, underpinned by a performance management framework, and allied with financial planning (medium and long term financial investment) has enabled the

Council to continue to set balanced budgets in a financially sustainable manner, whilst ensuring the delivery of its core purpose.

The Council also continues to work effectively with local partners to deliver collectively against its strategic priorities, utilizing expertise at resources at a place level with strategic partners. For example the Council leads on the Children and Young Peoples Partnership, working in partnership across all organization's which have an interest in supporting children young people and families to make Sefton the best place to grow up by keeping children safe, healthy, happy and heard as well as giving them the tools to achieve whatever they set out to achieve, whilst also responding to issues including child poverty, children's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

The Council is determined to continue to co-design and work with its strategic partners on initiatives to transform service delivery for the benefit of our residents and communities (examples of this include working with the ICB and Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, to deliver a community-centred prevention initiative to address health inequalities as part of the place regeneration of Bootle town centre, and the huge expansion of Maghull Health Park to become a gateway for investors and innovators to transform the future of mental health provision).

In summary, the Council has had to, and continues to, continually improve, and transform the way it designs and delivers services to make the best use of the resources available to it and its key strategic partners, to be ambitious for our residents, communities, businesses, and our workforce.

Section 2

How does the Council plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources?

The Council is digitally ambitious and embraces opportunities to improve its data maturity through strategic financial investment in technology maximize its capacity by integrating and upskilling existing resource, triangulation of data, and reducing silo working across the council. We have ambitious plans in place for both revenue and capital financial investment to support the delivery of its Transformation Programme, which in turn is linked to the delivery of the key priorities identified in the Corporate Plan. This includes implementation of technology to improve delivery of services against key objectives, whilst maximising the use of available resources at a time when budgets are under so much pressure, costs are spiralling, and capacity is limited.

Some key technology projects that have already been delivered include:

- All council staff have access to agile working KIT including, laptops and mobile phones as required, this access includes the provision of touch down spaces in office accommodation as well as support to work from home in line with service delivery requirements. Since 2021 the Council's New Ways of working programme has allow the authority to reduce its office footprint by 29%, enabled more effective working, supported residents and saved money that has been invested in front line services.
- The Council has redesigned and relaunched its Corporate Website ensuring that it is easy to use and is in line with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.
- The new Customer Experience Platform has been launched, providing improved self-service options for residents across the Borough.
- A Digital Inclusion Partnership for Sefton is now established with an ambitious Digital Inclusion Strategy for residents launched in in 2022.
- The Council has worked in partnership with Liverpool City Region colleagues (LCR Connect) during the build phase of the region's full fibre, ultrafast gigabit capable network, which is now nearing completion across the borough.
- The Council is committed to working in partnership with the LCR Connect Team to expand mobile network coverage, including 5G across the Borough, and a free public Wi-Fi offer has been designed within Bootle Strand.
- The TECS Strategy (Technology Enabled Care Strategy) has been launched with a significant number of schemes in development or underway across Sefton, including partners.
- The Council is working in partnership with the wider City Region to explore the opportunities afforded by the Internet of Things to develop a Smart Cities approach, discrete programmes are also underway across the borough including Air Quality Sensor deployment.

The Council continues to explore options around implementing the following specific examples as part of its 3-year Transformation Plan, aligned to its Corporate Plan and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy:

- Route planning technology for managing Home to School Transport provision that will allow it to efficiently plan routes to transport vulnerable children safely and reliably to and from school, with 'live route' capability to ensure all parties stay informed in real-time, giving parents and schools peace of mind with up-to-date

information. This should minimise the dependency on non-contracted provision and private taxis, whilst continuing to meet the individual needs of each child. The same route optimisation technology will also allow for improved efficiency in waste collection and street cleansing, building a digital model of the service and comparing different options to identify more efficient and effective operating routes.

- Asset Management and work scheduling technology to improve ground maintenance activity and workflow, maintaining a complete digital repository of land ownership and areas which the council has responsibility for maintaining, and scheduling resources. The same technology will be used for corporate asset management.
- Expanding our Children's Case Management technology to encompass the EHC needs assessment, planning, delivery, and review workflow processes, including an online portal for parents, carers and young people to engage with the SEN teams directly, and for health professionals to submit report contributions as part of the assessment stage.

The Council's digital strategy Sefton Council Digital Strategy 2020-2023 and Sefton's Draft Digital Strategy 2024-2027 outline our vision to become a place connected by people, supported by technology, with connected communities that thrive; with support for local people and businesses that are empowered to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by digital technology. The next iteration of the Digital Strategy is out for consultation, and we will continue to:

- Develop Strong Digital Foundations, ensuring that Sefton has the core Infrastructure and services in place to maximise the opportunities afforded by Digital, this includes working with regional colleagues to maximise the investment made in superfast full fibre across the region. The council is committed to making sure that all digital services are secure and in line with industry standards, alongside this we pledge to be transparent about how we use and share the personal data of all residents. Finally, within this theme the authority aims to ensure that the Digital Strategy supports the councils Climate Emergency and commits to exploring innovative approaches to achieve net zero emissions.
- Support an Enhanced Customer Journey. Sefton has invested in its website and online solutions to allow people to self-serve, we plan to continue this journey over the forthcoming year by providing more opportunities for people to transact with the Council online and we seek to explore new technologies such as AI to improve the customer experience, online, in person and via the telephone.
- Data and intelligence. Expand on the progress that the Council has made in the adopting enterprise Data Warehousing technology & Power BI for data analysis, performance management and predictive analytics (including consideration of the use of AI where appropriate). We will also continue to develop and maximise data and information sharing protocols to facilitate information-sharing between partner organisations to enable better customer experiences and more efficient delivery of services. For example, in the 'Support families programme.' We will build on these developments and our established, strong, information governance arrangement to expand real-time access to validated data across as many Council services as possible, improving out analytical capability, strategic, tactical and operational decision making, and use of resources.
- Supporting the workforce of the future. Over the next 12 months Sefton will replace our older mobile devices to ensure that all staff are equipped with suitable devices to allow them to work effectively. In addition this refresh programme will ensure that all devices are suitable for upgrade to Windows 11, thereby ensuring that Sefton

reduces it technical debt and that all the estate can be secured and patched appropriately. Work is underway to upgrade the corporate Wi-Fi estate to allow growth and support agile working across all sites.

Further examples that seek to improve how the Council plans to take advantage of technology and make better use of data over the next 12-months include:

- Moving the Council's Data Centre to a new location within the Liverpool City region, supporting the corporate property rationalisation programme. This move will also see the refresh of ICT appliances and servers and the continued removal of legacy systems from the estate.
- Continuing to support the delivery of ICT solutions in support of SEND services as well as the requirements of the Children's improvement programme, in addition to exploring the use of new technologies to reduce the administration burden and any duplication of effort across the workforce, thereby ensuring that colleagues can focus on key deliverables.

In summary the Council remains ambitious in the adoption and development of technology to continually improve and transform the way it designs and delivers services. It will continue to make strategic financial investment in areas that will allow it to take advantage of technology to continually improve and transform, aligned to our corporate priorities, whilst making the best use of technology for our residents, communities, businesses, and our workforce.

Section 3
What are the Council's plans to reduce wasteful spend within the organisation and its systems?

Sefton Council spending is rigorously monitored and judiciously aligned to our annual budgets and the priorities in the Council Plan, and therefore we do not consider any of it 'wasteful.'

In section (1) the Council explained how it has responded to unprecedented reductions in settlement funding from Government, how it has delivered significant savings, how it has maximised available resources, and how it has transformed services to become more efficient, but remaining community focused, ambitious, and operating under the principles of high-challenge & high-support. Over the last decade we have had to respond to increasing financial pressures resulting from local government funding cuts and have mechanisms in place to ensure we continue to do so effectively.

The Council's long-standing approach to planning and performance management, based on an "Analyse – Plan – Do – Review" cycle for continuous improvement and change, is strategically aligned with its rigorous financial management process, and allows Strategic Leaders to identify opportunities to improve efficiency across the organisation. The cycle for planning and performance management, and the annual budget process provide the opportunity for the Council's Senior Leaders and Cabinet Members to work together to affirm Council priorities and to challenge expenditure, service delivery and transformation activity against the corporate priorities. It also allows provides the vehicle for consideration of the financial and operational impact of legislative changes or future risks to services. The outcome of our planning and performance cycle directly informs the MTFP process and the budget report to full Council. Progress on service delivery, transformation activity, and financial monitoring is reported to Cabinet quarterly, and in-year monitoring, and regular reporting highlights any financial pressures, allowing the Council to respond and instigate corrective action to address challenges.

The Council has established processes, procedures and rules in place to manage spend, with a clear scheme of delegation and financial regulations set out within the [Council's constitution](#), which is systemically aligned to its process for commissioning and [procurement of goods and services.](#)

Following previous Peer challenge activity in September 2018 and September 2022, the Council's most recent Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge in November 2023 highlighted the robustness of its financial controls and the connectedness of the strategic direction, priorities setting and principles for performance and financial monitoring across the local system in Sefton.

The Council is ambitious for our workforce, and is committed to workforce engagement, wellbeing and productivity, evidenced in our [workforce development plan](#) and positively reinforced in our most recent staff survey conducted by BMG, where the majority of measures score above the BMG Local Authority comparative benchmark for satisfaction, with 94% of respondents committing "to go the extra mile at work when required" and 91% of respondents committed "to helping Sefton Council be successful." Furthermore, the Council is committed to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), and there are ongoing plans to ensure that EDI is woven throughout the culture of the organization and is integral to our workforce development plans, for example whole workforce training sessions aimed at

embedding key EDI principles into everything we do. Our EDI strategy, along with this workforce plan, are fully aligned to the Council's vision, values, and behaviours, which is to build a more inclusive organisation which serves our people and our communities with honesty, integrity, and objectivity, and we have a zero tolerance to all forms of discrimination, with further guidance created by our workforce and other stakeholders who have lived experience.

Sefton Council encourages a culture where employees understand and feel able to deliver the priorities set by the Council. We have a positive relationship with the Joint Trade Unions, recognising their critical role in supporting the workforce. We work to make employees feel valued and we listen to the views of our employees and trade unions and build upon our commitment to our priorities by communicating in a clear and consistent way.

However, like other local authorities, Sefton Council struggles recruit to all vacancies on a permanent basis. Ongoing reductions in funding and pay freezes, or below inflation pay rises over the last 10-15 years, has resulted in a significant real terms reduction in pay for permanent staff over that period; arguable discouraging people from a career in local government making recruitment challenging. This correspondingly has increased the Council's dependency and use of agency staff. Notwithstanding the situation, the Council takes a balanced approach to the use of consultants and temporary agency workers in the organisation, accepting that in some cases it is the most cost-effective solution to securing certain skillsets or bridging a capacity gap for a particular period. The Council has continued to see an increase in use and cost over of consultants and agency workers in the medium term, particularly across Children's Services where 27% of the workforce is agency staff, however the use and costs of interim, agency, and consultancy staff are regularly reviewed as part of the Council's in-year financial monitoring arrangements.

The Council has also been innovative it is approach to seek ongoing opportunities to reduce consultancy and temporary agency worker costs and to recruit permanent members of staff where it is appropriate to do so (for example its International Social Worker Programme bringing social workers from Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa; establishing its Social Work Academy to allow Newly Qualified Social Workers to complete their Assessed and Supported year in Employment ASYE and go on to settle into asocial work career in a structured and managed way; and its work-based learning Apprenticeship, and Graduate programmes - developing and securing capacity in specific disciplines, including financial management and data analysis).

Sefton operates within The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, which is led by Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram and brings together the region's six local councils – Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, and Wirral – to tackle the big issues that matter to us all, together. Through the 'devolution' deal, Sefton has a voice in local investment decisions that have a real impact on our communities, like transport, employment and skills, culture, digital and housing. It also benefits from inter-authority collaborative working and procurement opportunities to improve value for money, sustainability, and resilience to make a real and meaningful difference to the lives of the people living and working in the area.

As a result of the Peer Challenge the Council has recently established a Commissioning and Contract Management Board, which provides oversight and assurance in respect to the way services are procured, contracted managed across the council. The Board provides

support and strengthens the oversight and challenge of procurement, commercial expertise, social value, and contract management of the engagement of goods and services across the council with the private and voluntary sector. This ensures value for money for all external spend, focusing on the remaining 25% of the Council spend, and enables the Council both corporately and politically to be clear about how spend delivers on our all our corporate objectives (including, family-friendly and child-centred, social value, real living wage, and supporting the local economy)

The Council has further redefined its commercial mindset and will:

- Develop an annual programme that seeks to review and provide assurance that the Council provides cost effective services and receives value for money from these services and large procurement exercises.
- Embed this ethos in the commissioning and contract management board and thereby embed the Councils' commissioning and contract management approach alongside procurement.
- Provide commercial expertise to certain proposed budget proposals across the Council to develop and deliver savings programmes, and
- Challenge the financial performance and financial resources allocated to certain services and functions within the Council with a view to ensuring value for money is delivered and to identify potential savings.

In summary the Council has effective, systemic processes and controls in place to mitigate wasteful spend within the organisation and to support its ambition to transform and continually improve services for our residents, communities, businesses, and our workforce.

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

Significant financial challenges are clear barriers to progress. Funding has reduced by 51% over the last decade, and the Council has experienced a significant reduction in real terms spending power. Given the national context of volatile inflation, high energy costs, increases to the National Living Wage, and the continuing rise in the demand for services, Sefton is under sustained pressure to manage financial restraints, which is affects the organisations' capacity to deliver service improvements and ambitious strategic outcomes. The overall reduction of resource means that our focus defaults delivery of statutory services rather than on the preventative and capacity building measures that could support demand reduction. This is driving more need into systems, which increases costs and leads to poorer outcomes overall.

The Council has clear focus on its Medium Term financial plan and strategy to deliver financial sustainability. Furthermore it has developed its transformation programme to support the delivery of our Corporate Plan, and to be the vehicle to deliver financial sustainability. Stringent planning is ensuring that we prioritise the resources available to deliver our core services and Council is committed to increasing its level of reserves and balances to increase financial resilience.

Barriers preventing progress can be summarised as:

- Simplify the funding landscape for local authorities. Removing the intensive, bureaucratic process of bidding for funding, and provided high value and targeted funding (e.g. increased capital funding for place regeneration, increased transformation funding to support change and technology adoption at pace, increased funding where demand for support in the system is exponentially increasing in areas such as adult social care and SEND) could unlock the potential of local economies, creating visible improvements within our places and our communities at pace. Furthermore, it would arguably remove unnecessary competition between authorities for funding.

- 3 year settlement to allow greater certainty in our medium and long term investments. Funding settlements for local government have continued to be single year, rather than providing certainty over a longer period through multi-year settlements. Support from government by providing increased assurance of future funding would increase the Council's financial planning capacity, reducing the degree of financial uncertainty, and allow the Council to understand the funding that will be available to it, and therefore to plan effectively to shape its services over the medium and long term.

- Funding to mitigate the increased demand of SEND. The SEND system is underpinned by investment in the high need budget, but in Sefton the funding is not keeping pace with the increasing demand. Demand continues to increase; since 2019 the number of EHCPs maintained by Sefton Council has increased from 1,637 to 3,433 (June 2024), an increase of approximately 210%, a rate of 435 per 10,000 children and young people aged 0-25, above local and regional comparators. This unprecedented demand for additional SEND support driven by legislation, changing

expectations, and more children with complex needs is putting further substantial demand on the Council High Needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. Additional funding to respond to this burden is required.

- Funding for delivering academisation of schools. The education landscape of the Borough will change fundamentally with an ongoing growth in the number of academies and the Council's role is therefore to accommodate this change and respond to it. There are costs for the Council when a school converts to become an academy. The Council gets no financial support and often bear the full cost of the work they undertake by law to facilitate transfers of status, and inherit the school debt, forcing the Council to use its government education grant to clear the debts, when this money could instead be spent in ways which directly benefits pupils. Sefton Council successfully engages with its academies and free schools in an equal and respectful dialogue that promoted a positive working relationship based on partnership and trust, and it continues to support academies in the delivery of education wherever possible, whilst respecting an academy's right to choose its own path and make its own decisions. The Council has successfully adapted its role in education to become a co-ordinator, facilitator and broker of partnerships, however, the liability for conversion debt is a barrier to increasing financial support to improve educational outcomes for all.

Debatably 'Productivity Plans' themselves are a likely to place a new burden on the Council, and if the government intends to request regular monitoring reports or put an increased emphasis on performance reporting relative to Productivity Plans this would impact Council resources, distracting them from other priorities directly related to continuous improvement and transformation activity. Further advice from government on the intended use of Productivity Plans and how they may be used to inform future funding settlements is welcomed.

Performance Monitoring

How will this plan be monitored and assessed to assure the authority, and residents, that plans for improving productivity will be delivered?

The Productivity Plan provides a summary of the work that the Council has or is undertaking, and feeds from other plans, including the Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Plan, which are reported to Cabinet on a quarterly basis. This Productivity Plan will be approved by Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and shared with Cabinet, if there is a continued requirement to do so, it will be refreshed on an annual basis to identify progress and opportunities for increased efficiency, following the same reporting mechanism.