

Walsall Council Productivity Plan

June 2023



Walsall Council

PROUD OF OUR PAST OUR PRESENT AND FOR OUR FUTURE

Productivity Plan Walsall Council Narrative

Introduction

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council is on an improvement journey. In recent years we have modernised our workforce, skills, and ways of working, bringing in talented leadership, ensuring innovation and change and have seen great progress in partnership working across the Borough. This note sets out the strategic context that the Council is currently operating within, highlighting Walsall's continued focus on place and improvement. Like other local authorities, we are seeing increased demand for services at a time of greater financial challenge. Despite this, we continue to deliver outcomes, and have the right leadership, structures, skills, and tools in place to generate innovative solutions at pace. This journey has been recognised through a successful LGA Corporate peer review in 2023¹ but also through winning the LGC award for 2024 Most improved Council and recognition for our Senior Leadership team from this year's MJ awards.

Transformation journey

Back in 2018, an LGA peer review described us as a well-respected council with leadership that was highly regarded regionally but noted the need for clear strategic and financial direction. With £78m of savings to find over the next five years, 10% of our entire budget, we needed to fundamentally change to develop more responsive, digitally driven services while engaging communities and staff in the process. Our solution was the Proud Programme. In October 2018, Walsall's Cabinet approved the establishment of the Proud Programme – a whole Council programme to achieve better outcomes and customer experience, increase staff satisfaction and engagement and improve service efficiency and performance. The transformation focused on changing our ways of thinking, behaviours, and how we get things done. The Council engaged PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) as a strategic partner to provide transformation expertise, resource capacity and skills transfer to support delivery. This programme ran from 2019 to 2022 and through it the Council has delivered significant transformation, and has matured its internal capability and capacity to deliver ongoing effective organisational change². Proud delivered significant improvements in customer and employee satisfaction, financial efficiency, and organisational capability.

Customer outcomes

- Customer satisfaction rose from 67% to 73% and 97% of telephone calls are now answered within 49 seconds at the Customer experience centre.
- Introduction of Customer Relationship Management system for residents in March 22 providing online access to request, book and pay for a range of 'Clean and Green' services.
- A new telephony system and web site introduced to make access to information and services easier and clearer for residents.
- 50% channel shift in customer behaviour to digital self-service with over 25k My Walsall accounts setup and over 50K online transactions to date.
- Introduction of 'Walsall Connected' a partnership of 29 local (21 run by local community partners) 'Walsall Connected' centres that bring together staff and volunteers from different agencies. These centres offer residents' access to advice and support in a convenient local location and help them to self-serve digitally giving them transferrable digital skills³. Over 14K customers have been supported in the first 18 months and 86.3% enquiries solved at first contact².

Staff satisfaction

- Our recent staff survey showed improvement in levels of employee engagement (from 57% in 2017 to 64% in 2021), staff participation (from 44% in 2021 to 53% in 2023) and organisational satisfaction. The percentage of staff who feel the council is going in the right direction is up by 20 points, the % staff who think they have a positive future at the council – up by 17 points, the % staff who say their manager encourages ideas – up by 16 points.

¹ [Independent review highlights good progress | Walsall Council](#)

² [March 2024 Cabinet report Proud Transformation](#)

³ [Walsall Connected - get help to get online | Walsall Council](#)

⁴ [Walsall connected year one annual report](#)

- Introduction of Council wide values and behaviours and a values driven recruitment process.
- Our workforce strategy (2022) ensuring we will have the right staff with the skills to deliver⁵.
- Our award winning (Public Services People Managers Association awards, Best Organisational Development Programme 2024) Connected working model provides managers the tools, training and coaching to improve performance, culture, and staff development. [\[OBJ\]](#)
- Our new Operating Model for IT service provision providing more strategic delivery of digital developments and technologies to support staff and service delivery.

Service efficiency and performance.

- A total of £53.76m of savings has been delivered as at the end of 2023/24. Taking into account a carry-forward of £5.13m of yet to be realised savings from 2023/24 along with £20.10m of new savings in 2024/25, this equates to a total of £78.99m savings since inception.
- Introduction of One Source system to automate and improve processes around financial, procurement and people management.
- Migration of IT systems to cloud based system, paperless record keeping, migration to Microsoft 365 to enable flexible and more efficient ways of working.
- Council 'Hub' services of Business Insights, Policy & Strategy and Communications created and introduced to encourage insight driven decision making and effective engagement and communication with residents.
- Development of commercialisation and income generation workstream on track to generate circa £10 M end of this year.
- Children's services are now 'good' having been rated 'requires improvement' by Ofsted in 2017. Inspectors said our investment has facilitated 'exceptional practice.'
- Walsall Right 4 Children shows our ambition to make sure that the right children and young people receive the right help at the right time. The programme has developed a model of locality working across children's services. Our WR4C strategy sets out our how we will aim to meet the needs of every child.
- Business Design Board established, new principles and ways of working established to limit layers and spans and ensure alignment of organisational design across the Council.

Our next phase of transformation

Proud officially ended in 2022 but it is embedded a culture of continuous improvement and a mature mechanism for delivering change. The Council is currently defining the next stages of Walsall's transformation journey which will be aligned to a refreshed Council Plan, Medium Term Financial Outlook and Directorate and Service area delivery plans. Walsall is developing a data driven approach to service redesign to address consistent and effective customer engagement (i.e. the Front Door into the Council) and maintain appropriate service delivery. To effectively carry out full end-to-end design, we are moving into the back-office area and designing automated digital processes that require little or no intervention. This provides the opportunity to make the biggest impact on service design and efficiencies. Small scale service improvement work continues through existing leadership arrangements whilst large scale transformation will be focussed on addressing areas of demand/cost pressures within services e.g. Adults & Childrens Social Care and ensuring that the Council is well equipped to handle regeneration of the borough at pace. The Council has been working with IMPOWER⁶ to support our review of priorities for transformation within Adults and Childrens and we will be pressing ahead with plans to ensure we continue to deliver the outcomes needed to support the most vulnerable in Walsall.

Our established PMO is maturing well and is well placed to transition into a Corporate PMO centre of excellence to support a revised set of transformation programmes. Work is underway to review the capacity of change and project resources across the Council as well as looking at lessons learned and a review of Council officer Governance to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity as we continue our transformation plans.

Our 2040 vision and new Council Plan

During 2022 organisations across Walsall came together with the Council to carry out a shared engagement programme with over 10,000 residents, staff, and businesses across the borough to understand aspirations, concerns, and priorities for the next 20 years. Engagement feedback was used

⁵ [Walsall Council - Workforce Strategy](#)

⁶ [IMPOWER | Better outcomes cost less](#)

to craft a strategy 'We are Walsall 2040' for all partners creating a shared vision and signal of intent, highlighting our aim to be the most improved borough in the region – a vibrant place where people are proud to live and residents in all neighbourhoods have the same life chances^{7 8}.

The Council is now developing a new Council Plan linked to the vision and ambitions of We are Walsall 2040. It will articulate to the public what the Council will do over the next 3-5 years to ensure delivery against the place ambitions and how we will continue our improvement journey. We are reviewing and updating our approach to Corporate Performance- developing a dashboard approach that is more user friendly, accessible, and efficient for services, Members, and the public to understand. We are reviewing the metrics and KPIs to ensure we can benchmark locally and nationally as appropriate and that we include internal assurance measures as well as place-based measures that matter to our residents.

Strategic partnerships

Linked to the We are Walsall 2040 outcomes and shared deliverables we have carried out a review of our strategic and thematic partnerships across the Borough. We are amending focus of the strategic partnership (CEX level) to ensure shared accountability, focus on delivery and joined up effective working at pace. We have introduced a new Economic partnership working with anchor businesses and SMEs across the borough to support implementation of our Economic Strategy⁹ and are developing a Net Zero Climate Change forum to support continued sustainable growth and our local/regional Net Zero 2041 aspirations.

Improving wellbeing and preventative approaches underpin our borough vision, through creating healthy, safe and prosperous places for our communities (via healthy regeneration, work to preserve and increase use of our green spaces, and community safety work), alongside providing support at the earliest opportunity. We are continuing to recover our health, care and education services following the COVID-19 pandemic, with increasing numbers of families being seen by our health visiting services, improved OFSTED ratings for our schools, reductions in teenage conceptions (290 in 2001, compared with 101 in 2021) and smoking prevalence (22% in 2011, compared to 14% in 2022) and an increasing numbers of adults being seen in our alcohol and drug treatment services. We have a vibrant community and voluntary sector, who provide a range of preventative activities across the lifecourse. Our local place-based health and care partnership Walsall Together continues to be nationally recognised¹⁰ having been shortlisted for this year's 2024 LGC awards¹¹. The partnership has shifted to outcomes focussed commissioning and contracting through population health budgets. Walsall Together has kept more people out of hospital, improved discharge pathways, enhanced care homes support, boosted workforce recruitment and retention, and bolstered community resilience. It has helped to narrow a health and care funding gap that had been predicted to reach £172m by 2022-23.

Walsall Council has been an active constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority since its inception. We are currently engaged in supporting the next phase of deeper devolution supporting development of a place-based strategy for Walsall to align regional funding and strategic drivers to our local 2040 ambitions and priorities. Our Leader and Members play an active role within the WMCA (West Midlands Combined Authority), and officers have an effective working relationship across the other 6 LAs. Walsall officers have provided feedback to shape the governance review workstream at the WMCA and believe there are efficiencies of process and ways of working to be made to ensure more effective regional delivery.

We work closely across the region and nationally with key partners to leverage in public and private sector investment to the borough. With our partners we have built a £1.5B regeneration programme that is well underway to transform the borough-£500M has been delivered (4,000 jobs and 2,000 homes) and £500M expected in next phase providing a further 2,000 jobs and 1,000 homes. Our Walsall Town Centre Masterplan aims to improve Walsall as a destination, respond to economic challenges and shape our economy for the future. We want to see a significant increase in residents living in the town, with Walsall's excellent public transport links making it easy to access work and leisure in the borough and beyond. Through the Connected Gateway project, £36.1m is being invested to transform the rail station

⁷ December 2022 Cabinet [Report](#) We are Walsall Engagement [findings](#)

⁸ June 2023 [Cabinet Report, strategy](#) and consultation findings

⁹ [Walsall's plan for a better future for everyone | Walsall Council](#)

¹⁰ [Walsall Together wins HSJ the Place Based Partnership and Integrated Care: Walsall Together](#)

¹¹ [Walsall Together shortlisted for national award - Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust](#)

and links to the two bus interchanges with enhanced public realm, supported by £11.4m from the Future High Streets Fund and council match funding of £24.63m. The Connected Gateway project should complete by 2026 and will transform the public realm in Park Street, at the heart of Walsall Town Centre. Bloxwich Town Centre is also seeing major investment, with its £21.3m Town Deal investment helping to establish an Incubation Space and Digital Access Centre, Green Bloxwich enhancing parks and open spaces and a programme of housing delivery, aimed at removing derelict sites and providing much needed training in construction for residents.

EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion)

Walsall is a diverse borough with 29% of residents from non-White backgrounds¹². This diversity means the borough encompasses a broad tapestry of heritages, ethnicities, faiths, and communities. The Council is committed to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) to ensure we can adequately provide to the communities we serve. The Council has a clear governance structure and processes in place to ensure EDI is embedded at the heart of our service design, delivery, workforce, and strategic decision-making. Corporate Equalities Group (CEG) is the key governance group of senior officers and oversees the Council requirements against the Equality Act, Public Sector Equality Duty, and Human Rights Act. We recently reviewed the Terms of Reference to strengthen roles and responsibilities and ensure customer and service representation and voice from across the Council. CEG has a clear remit in taking key decisions around EDI and ensuring it is embedded even further in service design, commissioning, and delivery. Underneath CEG the Workforce Equalities Board oversees workforce and HR related EDI issues. Supporting this our staff networks cover a range of equality characteristics and enable staff to have a voice, discuss workforce issues, concerns and promote opportunities, learning and diversity. Our 52 EDI Champions play a crucial role within/across services to advocate for EDI issues, share knowledge and learning and act as ambassadors for the agenda. The Council also provides mandatory annual EDI training for managers and staff to ensure everyone working at Walsall Council understands the importance of an inclusive and diverse workforce and services to meet our community's needs.

Walsall for All¹³ is our community cohesion and integration partnership within Walsall. In March 2018, the government published the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, which recognised that tailored local integration plans are needed to tackle issues that are specific to each area. Walsall was chosen as one of five areas to work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government at that time. The partnership has delivered fantastic initiatives around integration and cohesion to ensure all communities are supported, get along well, and can live good lives in Walsall. Recently the partnership has carried out extensive engagement to determine its new focus and strategy to continue to build and ensure effective integration across the borough.

Data

Walsall Council use data to inform local reporting and decision-making, along with the completion of statutory data returns. Data is made available to residents through facilities including the Walsall Insight website¹⁴. The Council is developing a Data and insights strategy and designing an approach to master data management, which will focus on key service areas where data is captured. This strategy aims to ensure data is accurate and clean and can be reliably used and aggregated to deliver accurate reporting. We will exploit learning and experience in areas where data is being cleansed and use the existing technology infrastructure to develop a data warehouse with the aim of developing a single view of our customer. Furthermore, we are undertaking work to pursue opportunities to automate and integrate and have a strong working partnership with Microsoft. Our data needs to be standardised and linked across systems to allow us to get the best output from predictive analytics and AI (Artificial Intelligence). The introduction of AI within the Microsoft technology stack will allow workflow and processing efficiencies. More specific uses of AI (e.g. Power Bi and Co-pilot) could significantly increase capacity and reduce development/implementation timescales. The Council has taken the decision to invest to save by funding 300 AI Microsoft licences and investing staff time and effort into 'Change Agents' training so that we utilise the investment in MS products, tools, and staff effectively and embrace AI. The organisation is also assessing the feasibility of more wide-ranging uses of AI, such as monitoring the needs of social care service users to predict demand and target resources effectively.

¹² [Diversity - Walsall Insight \(walsallintelligence.org.uk\)](https://walsallintelligence.org.uk)

¹³ [Integration | Walsall for All | England](#)

Alongside this we are working with TVI (Triple Value Impact) to identify and scope further digital/technology opportunities for service redesign or intervention. These include using AI to automate SARs and FOIs, using data to target marketing at suitable foster families, using data science to identify children at risk of going into care and using data to pre-empt those likely to need care and intervention enabling preventative support.

We frequently share data with local partners, regional partners and nationally as part of statutory or other organised returns. This provides the opportunity to benchmark our data with similar sized local authorities so that we can reflect and learn. Data and engagement information forms the basis behind many of our thematic and operational partnership discussions leading to prioritisation of resource and service design and delivery e.g. development of joint needs assessments (JSNA¹⁴, Domestic abuse NA¹⁵), evaluations and performance process reviews.

Budget and assurance

The council is proud of its robust financial planning and management and has a good record of accomplishment of delivering services in challenging times whilst delivering a balanced budget. Our medium-term financial framework and four-year plan ensures that financial health and sustainability are at the forefront of thinking in budget setting. The council has delivered c.£255m of savings from 2010/11 to 2022/23. Our strategy involves funding activity that supports the Council Plan/2040 aspirations and/or with a clear business case 'invest to save' model. We currently have savings of £25m built into our 2024/25 budget position and this has been the broad trend of savings to be achieved in previous years and the trend moving forward. These savings have been identified from our transformation programme, capitalising on income generating activities, leveraging our assets with an increasingly commercial approach to cost recovery and managing, monitoring, and reducing third party spend.

In October 2023, the Council changed external agency staff providers, following a comprehensive review of agency provision/service, spend and value for money. Opus People Solutions were appointed as the Council's new agency provider, via the West Midlands Employer framework. Opus' charge rates are lower than those of our previous provider, providing us with an immediate and accumulative reduction in agency fees. Additionally, Opus can resource into all roles (including exec/senior roles) across the Council, thereby reducing our immediate and future reliance on use of alternative agencies, who charge a higher margin.

Our new Commercial strategy (in development) will outline our approach to generating income and engendering a more entrepreneurial and commercial culture in the organisation. We are focussing on commercial culture, commercial process, and commercial programmes. To date over recent years, we have delivered circa £15M in commercial income and are developing a clear pipeline of opportunities for the future. We are continually working toward becoming an efficient council and are at the start of embedding outcomes-based budgeting in how we work, fostering a greater look at performance and insight to drive budget decision making aligned with our aims from our Council Plan. As part of this process, we have undertaken comprehensive budget consultation and been cited as an area of particularly good practice by our External Auditors in relation to actively seeking the views of the local community and other stakeholders.

This year we have started our budget setting process even earlier to identify cross cutting and collaborative opportunities that deliver outcomes. Although Adults and Children's services have the largest budgets, they also have the largest demand and inflationary pressures and will be a crucial focus for ongoing transformation. We are reviewing our contracts and our Third party spend Board challenges each contract that comes forward to achieve the best value for money. We have also strengthened our financial and commercial training for budget holders to ensure they understand their accountabilities and are further expanding the use of behavioural science to undertake psychologically informed approaches to service design, processes, and communication to yield better services at reduced cost.

¹⁴ [JSNA - Walsall Insight \(walsallintelligence.org.uk\)](https://www.walsallintelligence.org.uk)

¹⁵ <https://www.walsallintelligence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2024/01/Walsall-Domestic-Abuse-SNA-December-2023.pdf>

Our approach to financial planning and management has allowed us to invest significantly in the future of the Council and borough- capital investment has been targeted at infrastructure and we have skilfully used our own resources as leverage for wider public funds. We have invested heavily in our IT infrastructure to transform how we work digitally across the council and with our customers and have also invested in properties to convert to council run children's homes due to the escalating costs of care and are exploring opportunities to convert our green waste to energy.

From a governance perspective we have a Council/Cabinet model at Walsall supported by audit and scrutiny committees. To ensure that there is challenge to decisions made by Cabinet, the council established five Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Four relate to specific service functions whilst the fifth, the Scrutiny Overview Committee (SOC), includes the chairs of four other scrutiny committees in its membership and has a strategic oversight of the council's strategic plans and services. In 2021, the council conducted a major review of the councillor Code of Conduct to ensure that the Code was compliant with the LGA Model Code of Conduct following recommendations made by the Committee for Standards in Public Life. We are currently undertaking a review of officer governance to ensure effective adherence to the Council's code of governance.

Opportunities and challenges

As a Council we face significant pressure on our budgets with increased demand across all services most acutely in Children services and Adult Social care with ever more complex needs of our customers and residents. Our Walsall challenges for services include:

- National Fair Cost of Care exercise - uplift additional £5m this year, c£7m next year
- Impact of complex inequalities and social deprivation - Increasing complexity of packages and provider requests
- Impact NHS pressures post pandemic
- Increased demand for housing and temporary accommodation and uncertainty on the future of government grants (RSI and Housing First, Energy Improvements).
- Inequitable distribution of asylum seekers and refugees- pressure on local services
- Foster carer recruitment a challenge nationally
- Childrens Services challenges in SEND referrals, safeguarding and placement sufficiency.
- Freedom to operate and innovate at pace- Local Government has delivered in covid-19 and needs to be supported.
- Staff recruitment and retention across all social care due to market competition.

Our challenges and ask for local government finances:

- **Business rates reset:** Resetting business rates to stabilise council finances in the short term.
- **Additional funding:** Providing additional funding targeted at children's services and homelessness and temporary accommodation, the two most under pressure areas.
- **Full formula grant:** Moving away from business rates to full formula grant. If business rates are to be reformed, they must be detached from local government funding.
- **Dedicated Schools Grant:** Clarity on extension of statutory override past March 2026 to minimise funding uncertainty and impact on LA finances.
- **Independent distribution:** Formula grant being distributed independently is the only way to fairly stabilize the system with the money that is in the system.
- **Sustainable funding:** Delivering sustainable funding for local government by increasing grant funding in real terms, i.e., more money in the system and providing certainty for the system by ensuring that all future local government finance settlements are multi-year and published in suitable time to allow for effective financial planning.
- **Alternative incomes:** Exploring alternative incomes for local government with a basis of equalization.
- **Council tax reform:** Reviewing and reforming council tax and the council tax benefit system.
- **Prevention focus:** As funding has fallen, there has been a reduction in spend on preventative services and a greater focus on reactive, demand-led provision. We would welcome dedicated prevention streams to free up resource and capacity to support prevention initiatives.