



**Rochford District
Council**

**Councillor James Newport (Liberal Democrat Group)
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Representing Downhall and Rawreth
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July 2024

We are pleased to present Rochford's Productivity Plan.

This Productivity Plan sets out Rochford District Council's achievements to date and our plans to further embed our digital transformation plans, reduce bureaucracy, make better use of resources, and improve service delivery through collaboration with partners and stakeholder engagement. We will continue to monitor our performance, invest in our staff and services, and communicate our progress.

The plan was endorsed by Members on 11th July 2024.

The plan will be published on our website alongside key information to keep residents informed on progress. We intend to review the plan on a regular basis to ensure key updates are shared.

Our [Corporate Priorities](#) are being refreshed for 2025 but they are currently:

- Financially sustainable.
- Early Intervention.
- Maximise our assets.
- Enable communities.

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Question 1: How you have transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources

Just over two years ago, Rochford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council formed a [strategic partnership](#). This unique and challenging partnership aims to do things differently; to consider alternative opportunities, to create resilience, to improve the quality of the provision and to reduce costs.

Outcomes include:

- Shared management team
- [Service reviews](#), with sustainable service across both authorities, improved resilience and migration to shared technology and processes to further support efficiency.
- Shared management team and service reviews provide an ongoing saving across BBC and RDC of £651,000pa from 2024/25.
- A joint procurement for a [new leisure contract](#)
- Aligned processes and support tools for all areas of Transformation, Policy and [Funding](#)
- Policy and strategy registers, processes and templates established, aligned policies and strategies in development.
- Joint Corporate Project Register and project management approach established.
- Joined up approach to corporate performance, FOI, formal complaints and [risk monitoring](#) and reporting.
- Joint approach to communications campaigns.
- Joint training opportunities.
- Joint CCTV monitoring.
- Emerging joint grants and funding strategy to expand service delivery in partnership with community groups and corporate partners.
- Aligned methodology for [corporate vision](#) and priority setting, monitoring, and reporting.

Members receive quarterly updates on the Strategic Partnership through the Programme Board and by a [quarterly update to committee](#). Further, we are committed to involving residents in the future of the partnership. Following our recent [public consultation into the Strategic Partnership](#), we intend to provide more detail to residents on some of the key advantages of the partnership as well as the effect of 'doing nothing' against a backdrop of increasing pressures on council finances.

The next phase of transformation will consider where further work between the two services is needed before full integration. This will be documented in service area Transformation Plans. These will be supported by further monitoring of OfLog Metrics and benchmarking with other Essex authorities as part of the Essex Policy and Performance Network of officers and by making use of LG Inform.

As well as quarterly Performance and Formal Complaints reporting to committee, senior officers also benefit from a monthly Health of the Organisation report. We will further strengthen our reporting methods by implementing PowerBI across more services for a more efficient performance management process.

The effect of the partnership and other efficiency measures is reported quarterly to Members through [Budget Monitoring Reports](#).

Beyond our partnership with Brentwood Borough Council, Rochford also has shared service arrangements with the South East Essex Alliance, a partnership from across Castle Point, Rochford, and Southend who are working together with residents and communities to make support available closer to where people live. From this partnership, Castle Point Borough Council and Rochford District Council produced their Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Basildon Borough Council for Internal Audit, and is a member of [South Essex Councils \(SEC\)](#) ([Vision and priorities](#) and [Meeting Agendas & Minutes](#)), and [Essex Partners](#)

An LGA Peer Review is planned for March 2025.

Through feedback from the Community Safety Partnership along with joint operations with Essex Police, we will continue to strengthen partnerships with CSP & District wide partners, including Essex Police to:

- Highlight hot spot areas and emerging trends and action resolutions and tackle repeat offenders
- Improve awareness of Domestic Abuse and improve public confidence in reporting and reducing DA
- Reintroduction of Hate Incident Reporting Centres and ambassador training for front line staff
- Violence Against Women and Girls: Implementation of Safer Streets projects to improve women's safety.
- CCTV: Expand Rochford CCTV into hotspot areas

Brentwood and Rochford have joint working with partner organisations to improve public health:

- Linking with Castle Point Borough Council and the Essex County Council statutory Health Board.
- Rochford, Castlepoint and Southend Alliance work linked to Integrated Care Board
- Employ a Public Health Practitioner and Apprentice liaison with ECC Public Health team

Brentwood and Rochford share a Community Connect Trailer which is used to improve consultation and engagement with the community on public health issues.

Question 2: How you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

Rochford is a member of [Essex Digital Partnership \(EDP\)](#). The partnership strives to share knowledge, resource, and services to provide digital and technology solutions that support the business needs of each member.

Guided by our IT Strategy and infrastructure plan and a Joint IT and Digital Helpdesk, we are driving a programme that will see the organisation's data centered in a data warehouse that will allow us to surface and interrogate our data in a way that has never be available to us.

Brentwood and Rochford's joint consultation and engagement platform, [Engage with Us](#), provides opportunity to go beyond basic questionnaires and surveys to give residents and communities a voice. Our emerging joint Consultation and Engagement Strategy will ensure that we develop ways in which we can involve citizens and the voluntary sector in the design of the services and lend their voice to local decision making.

Rochford is within the median for major planning applications determined on time and for major / non-major planning applications overturned on appeal but are below average for non-major applications decided on time. The Council has worked

through a series of improvement projects through a Planning Improvement Board. These were identified following an external review of the service. Projects include those to improve the efficiency of the service through increased use of IT and templates and review of processes. A business manager post has been created within the service which will undertake a programme of continuous review and improvement for the planning service. Data is shared and monitored at a national level and at a local level via information dashboards to allow managers to easily spot trends in performance across a range of measures and act as appropriate.

[Rochford Environmental Business Alliance \(REBA\)](#) is a new initiative bringing together businesses across the district. Founded by key local businesses and supported the council with key local businesses, its aim is to encourage more sustainable and environmentally friendly practices by providing a platform to collaborate and learn – an inclusive place where businesses at any stage of the journey can identify information resources to help achieve their green goals.

Question 3: Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems.

Whilst the Council already aims to provide value for money for our residents, through our partnership with Brentwood Borough Council, Rochford will produce a series of service level Transformation Plans that will seek to further maximise efficiencies across a range of areas including procurement, process design, IT programs, policies, performance, projects and, where appropriate, service restructuring. These plans will not only align the two organisations, but also create natural efficiencies and associated savings.

We follow UK government procurement rules (Public Contracts Regulations (2015)) for all purchases. These rules exist to ensure free and fair competition and transparency. We base procurement of our requirements on the principles of best value to ensure it achieves efficiency, effectiveness, and value for money. The Procurement Strategy is under review following updated regulations. Procurement statistics reported to CLT on a quarterly basis. Our [Contracts Register](#) is published online.

[Internal Audit Progress](#) reports to the Audit and Governance Committee, this committee and the Scrutiny and Performance Committee are charged with providing independent assurance on risk management, assessing the [authority's financial management](#) and be responsible for general governance. Several key projects have formed their workplan, including: [Report on the progress to deliver improvements of the Development Management and Enforcement service and Mill Hall Arts and Events Update](#)

Recruitment is underway for the Appointment of an Independent Person at Audit committees. There will be focussed monitoring of audit recommendation completions and a Joint Internal Audit contract planned from April 2025.

Our [Internal Auditor](#) complies with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and gives assurance on the [risk management and internal control processes](#) in place in the Council to mitigate the risks identified.

- [External Audit Planning Report](#)
- [Annual Governance Statement](#)

- [Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#)
- [2024/25 BUDGET AND 2024-29 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY](#)

Whilst the council has Equality and Diversity policies and procedures in place, the spend on activities related to them is minimal.

The council does employ occasional agency and consultants where we face recruitment issues or require specialist support for short term projects. The council is focussed on keeping this spend low and seeks alternative ways of working such as cross council partnerships, outsourcing and secondments.

Question 4: The barriers preventing progress the Government can help to reduce or remove

There are a number of barriers which Government can remove to support productivity for local authorities. Some examples are provided below:

Financial Uncertainty

- Officers are expected to do more than ever before, delivering more complex services with a reduced budget.
- Reduction in government funding means only the bare minimum capital improvements can be considered or completed.
- The current financial backdrop poses financial risks to the Council's budget. There are further financial risks to pay inflation forecasts as well as cost pressures from the current high rates of general inflation. The high inflation rates, increasing bank rates and national living wage pressure will have further impact onto ongoing budgets.
- The 2024/25 Financial Settlement was a one-year settlement, not reflecting the full MTFS period. The recent tendency towards one-year settlements makes financial planning extremely challenging – this undermines the council's ability to invest in services and in long-term place-shaping.
- The Government's calculation on core spending power assumes councils will increase council tax by 2.99%. Lower tier authorities are allowed to apply the higher of the referendum limit of 3% or £5. The principle of a referendum limit undermines local democratic accountability. Additionally, upper-tier councils, the Police, Fire and parishes have more relaxed rules for Council Tax increases.
- New Homes Bonus allocations have continued in 2024/25 for one year. The Government has signalled a review of the system of allocation for 2025/26 but without a new strategy, councils cannot plan to accommodate the financial benefits of housing growth.
- Apart from Government funding via the settlement, which is for one year only, councils have, in recent years, had to bid for a multiplicity of grants – sometimes within very tight timescales. This is resource-intensive and does not necessarily result in success. Even when it does, there continues to be an overhead to submit returns as well as conduct post-submission audits.
- The local external audit backlog needs to be addressed at a national level. The tentative plans for a backstop date for the audit of accounts up to and including 2022/23 have not been confirmed by Parliament. This leaves huge uncertainty for both external auditors and local councils. The extensive delay in external audits, largely due to the failure of the national system, undermines

local transparency, the reputation of local councils' financial probity, and adds a substantial workload to officers. This has arisen through no fault of councils and has to be addressed.

- In addition to the external audit issues, the requirements of the Statement of Accounts are excessive, requiring a volume of work and detail that then needs to be audited, the majority of which is of little interest to the public. The Statement of Accounts requirements should be simplified to focus on the essentials to adequately report on financial stewardship in a form that the public can easily access.

National Government

- Government fiscal policy may potentially loosen at the same time as the Bank's monetary policy is still trying to take momentum out of the economy.
- Complicated, inconsistent, and misaligned processes for submitting data returns to central government.
- Lack of join-up between central government departments on issues including housing, homelessness prevention and asylum dispersal.
- Numerous statutory requirements to place notices in newspapers or issue written copies of routine notices.
- Excessive amount of information that is required in annual accounts or has to be published under the transparency code.
- Statutory overrides such as the requirement to value assets for accounts every year.
- Regulatory bodies seeking "to the letter" compliance with their statutory codes.
- We would also benefit from much greater flexibility for our council (and all councils) to decide how to raise and spend money locally. Central prescription and ringfencing constrain our ability to allocate our resources effectively.
- We have also been hampered by the tendency of Whitehall to design and decide policy that affects councils without engaging the sector as fully and as early as it could. This has resulted in initiatives and funds that are more complicated than necessary and that are difficult and, in some cases costly, for councils to implement. We strongly support much closer policy co-design between central government and local councils.

Housing

- OFLOG Proposed Metric: Homelessness and Rough Sleeping. Lack of stability and rising rents within the private rented sector means that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to prevent homelessness. Increased use of accommodation by the Home Office meaning a lack of supply for Local Authorities. LHA rates not reflective of current market rates. Lack of clinically supported accommodation, meaning that rough sleepers with increased needs cannot be housed.

Health and Wellbeing

- The [Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2025](#) sets out the five-year plan to improve the health and wellbeing of residents in Rochford and reduce the health inequalities at every stage of residents' lives.

Planning

- OFLOG Proposed Metric: Birth of new / Death of / Number of high growth enterprises. The Council has a very small economic growth budget to support new business growth and development. Additional regular funding such as that which was secured through Levelling Up would be helpful in continuing to support business start up and grow.
- OFLOG Proposed Metric: Gross Value Added per hour worked / Gross median weekly pay / Employment Rate 16. The Council can only play a very small part in influencing this area and continues to work with partners such as ECC, DWP and education providers to undertake this work. However, this is a non-statutory part of the Councils role and as such has limited funding and is a risk as Council budgets continue to be constrained. Making the service statutory and increasing funding available would be beneficial.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'J Newport', written in black ink.

Cllr James Newport
Leader, Rochford District Council