

Breckland Council's Productivity Plan 2024/25

Working 
Smarter



Productivity Plan
July 2024


Breckland
COUNCIL

Headline Statistics



Section 1: Productivity & Transformation

Breckland Council have made great strides in recent years to increase productivity and improve services across the organisation. One recent example has been the changes made at Elizabeth House, the council's offices in Dereham. A project has been completed to migrate all Breckland's Dereham-based staff onto the top floor of the building, therefore freeing up space on the ground floor to be rented out to other public sector partners. This project has resulted in an increase in income, accompanied with associated savings, totalling a combined £158k per annum for the council.

Breckland has faced a significant increase in the numbers of people presenting as homeless following the pandemic. As a result, costs associated with housing people in temporary accommodation (TA) have also increased. To cope with this pressure, the council has taken proactive steps to increase the number of affordable homes and TA places. In 2019, the council invested £1.8m in Elm House, Thetford, which provides high-quality temporary shelter for up to 35 people, including families. It is calculated that this investment saves the council £0.5m per annum in TA costs, at full capacity.

In addition to the Elm House investment, the council has recently purchased ten flats and one eight-bed HMO to house people in TA along with fifteen properties for those arriving in the UK via the Afghan and Ukrainian Resettlement Schemes – utilising Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) grant funding - thereby becoming a stockholding authority for the first time in nearly 30 years.

As a council we recognise the role that capital spending can play in transforming services, enabling longer-term productivity gains, and supporting growth. Targeted investment to unlock Breckland's growth potential is a measure that we are keen to explore, given the correct circumstances. A previous example when Breckland have taken this approach has been the investment in power supply at one of the district's key growth areas, Snetterton Commercial Hub. As a large, well-connected employment site, the area has potential to grow, but was constrained by the lack of accessible electrical capacity. The costs of necessary upgrades were a barrier to any individual landowner or developer. Breckland committed its own capital, coupled with resource secured through the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and Norfolk Business Rates Pool to deliver a new primary substation (PSS), completed in 2023. This new PSS has already leveraged £2m - £3.5m of private sector investment, resulting in an increase in future income to the council from business rates.



Breckland's initial Transformation Plan was first established in 2016. Since then, the council has a demonstrable record of achieving efficiencies, totalling £3.3m cumulative per year. (17.5% of our budget requirement). The Evolve Programme is Breckland's current iteration. Progress against this is monitored by our Finance Department, considered by the Corporate Management Team (CMT) at a 6 weekly Business meeting, then reported to Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Committee as part of the quarterly finance report.

A summary of our Evolve Programme can be found in **Appendix 1**.

To ensure accountability of spend, the council follows a rigorous budget setting process. Following submission of budgets by service managers the Finance Team conduct a first review to ensure no growth, unless approved. Following this, a line-by-line review and internal challenge of all departmental budgets by the Assistant Directors takes place collectively before budgets are put forward. The consolidated position is then presented to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with major changes from the previous year highlighted. SLT then conduct another round of challenge and scrutiny.

Political scrutiny also takes place when setting the budgets, with the draft budget taken to Overview and Scrutiny Commission for discussion before the final version is presented to Full Council. Throughout the year the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Cabinet receive reports every quarter on the financial performance of the organisation.

Section 2: Workforce & Culture

Breckland have been historically flexible in terms of service delivery models and will continue to be going forward. This was demonstrated when Breckland, North Norfolk and Kings Lynn councils entered a joint procurement for a waste and related services contract in December 2019. The 8-year contract delivers benefits to all councils in terms of the ability to share costs for overheads and management as well as some cross border services such as sharing of clinical waste collections. The contract has shared systems and processes as well as common service standards and a shared customer contact centre. The benefit of the shared procurement delivered cost avoidance when compared to what the likely contract costs would have been had the three councils procured services alone.

In respect of our plans moving forward, the council made the decision to bring its planning and building control service in-house after a successful 10-year outsourcing of the service to Capita. This will enable the council to drive £300,000 of savings per year (10% of total cost of service) and will provide greater opportunity to improve the service to ensure that it is running efficiently. The process of transferring staff is currently underway, and the service will officially be within the Breckland structure in July 2024

At Breckland, there is an embedded positive culture within the workforce that leads to staff feeling more valued - 76% of staff reported that they felt valued in our annual staff survey. Despite not having a specific Equality & Diversity post, Breckland have established a culture of inclusion and diversity across the organisation, ensuring that we meet our legal requirements against the Public Sector Equality Duty. Our Breckland Cares programme epitomises this, with a commitment to delivering a programme of caring activity spanning the entire organisation and focusing on all its people.

We are proud to be a forward-thinking organisation that cares, and we will continue to act, alongside our partners, to deliver meaningful change within our organisation and across the district.



The council does not spend a substantial percentage of its staffing budget on agency and consultancy staff. For the 2024-25 budget, Breckland Council will spend £38,200 on agency staff, and £73,840 on consultancy staff. This represents 0.25% and 0.48% of the total employee related budget of the council. As a small, predominantly rural district council, Breckland is an organisation with a lean workforce, as a result agency and consultancy staff are used when certain skills or expertise are required, but where this is not needed on a permanent basis.

0% of Breckland's budget is spent on trade union facility time.

Section 3: Prevention Work

Breckland Council delivers a great deal of preventative work that goes beyond its statutory duties with the knowledge that this generates savings for the district and wider public sector. Our Inspiring Communities Programme is a collaboration with key stakeholders to develop a community-led approach to enhance the lives of Breckland residents, with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention. The programme looks to tackle health inequalities, poor mental health, domestic abuse, social isolation and loneliness and vulnerability, and has resulted in wider public sector savings of £1.8m.

Inspiring Communities encompasses a variety of specific functions and initiatives. For example, the council hosts social prescribers, who help to signpost vulnerable residents to facilities that can help them with health, wellbeing, and welfare concerns, thereby preventing them from reaching a point of crisis in future and creating savings for the NHS and social care. Another example is the council's funding of the Mindful Towns and Villages programme, which has created a network of residents with mental health training across Breckland, thereby tackling poor mental health at the grassroots level before issues escalate.

A breakdown of the savings that Inspiring Communities drives across the public sector is provided below in **Appendix 2**.

Section 4 – Data & Technology

We have implemented several changes to how we use data and technology within services to enhance productivity and service delivery throughout the council. In 2019, through Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP), a partnership delivering the Revenues & Benefits services for five partner local authorities, we became one of the first sets of councils to automate data shared by DWP for Universal Credit claimants. We worked alongside our software provider to develop the functionality over several years, gradually increasing the number of records we could automate. In 2022-23 we were able to automate around 97% of the changes notified. The work also involved consulting with the public to simplify our Council Tax Support scheme, reviewing our verification policy and streamlining our procedures. The automation helped us reach our efficiency targets through resource savings of 5 FTE. We also became a reference site for automation and helped several other councils achieve similar results.



Our strategy for enhancing the quality of the data we gather involves a collaborative effort between our Communities Team and ARP. We have recognised the critical importance of early identification of vulnerable residents to provide timely support and intervention. To achieve this, both teams are working collaboratively to streamline data sharing processes and optimise information exchange. As part of this initiative, ARP have joined the Breckland Collaboration. This collaborative framework brings together various agencies and stakeholders with the shared objective of addressing the emerging needs of individuals and families through proactive interventions. By leveraging the resources and expertise of multiple partners within the Collaboration, we aim to effectively identify vulnerable individuals at an early stage and provide them with the necessary assistance and support they require.

Breckland has had recent successes in integrating different technologies to provide more efficient services and make savings. One notable investment is in a Chatbot system, which enables customers accessing the council's websites to have simple enquiries answered more promptly. This has resulted in around 80% of online queries being answered by the Chatbot and has reduced staffing requirement for the website's live chat by more than two-thirds. Subsequently, a chatbot is now also being used to handle simple phone enquiries, which has reduced the time spent handling calls by an average of 2 minutes per call.

Section 5 – Barriers

Breckland have delivered against all that has been asked of the local government sector and continue to provide high quality services, whilst maintaining low council tax. However, there are still some barriers that prevent the council from improving its productivity and services.

Financial Barriers

There are several financial barriers that could be addressed by central government which would allow Breckland to improve productivity and levels of service delivery. Firstly, we understand how the actions of some local authorities have led to restrictions on borrowing where a local authority is also acquiring investment assets for financial return. However, there are authorities like us who have successfully managed investment assets for many years without borrowing which has helped to keep our Council Tax at low levels for our residents. Part of maintaining a successful commercial property portfolio is the disposal & re-investment of assets ('churn') when needed, for example when the markets change, and offices are no longer sought after, but small industrial units are. The current guidance does not prevent capital expenditure to maintain existing investment properties and we would ask that this element of the guidance is extended to allow local authorities to re-invest capital receipts from investment assets back into another investment asset of the same value, provided these assets do not have any borrowing associated with them. This would help us maintain the rental incomes which keeps our council tax low and provide our local businesses with reliable and fit for purpose properties from a trusted landlord.

This Plan has focused on the role that preventative work can play in improving outcomes for residents and in creating wider savings for the public sector. For this reason, an increase in the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) would be essential. We are extremely effective at using this funding to help vulnerable residents; however, the grant we receive is not enough to meet local need. The welfare and financial benefits of DFGs are well documented. Recipients of a DFG avoid a care home placement by 4 years+ and home assessment and modification for people at high risk of a fall offers a return on investment of £3.17 to every pound spent as well as a social return on investment of £7.34 to every pound spent. Increasing funding for DFGs, would result in savings not just for the council, but for the wider public sector.



As has been mentioned earlier, Breckland have spent funds on prevention work through its transformative Inspiring Communities Programme, delivering over £1.8m in savings across the wider public sector. Despite spending significant funding and resource to improve health and social care outcomes, district councils, such as Breckland do not benefit from the social care levy, which goes solely to the upper-tier authority. Providing district councils, who do this kind of work, with a share of the Levy would be an effective way of supporting and incentivising them to do more.

We hope that the promised return to multi-year settlements is implemented as soon as possible; the added certainty that this provides will allow Breckland to plan more effectively and make clearer, longer-term decisions to improve productivity.

Increased Burdens

Breckland is not alone in finding it challenging to increase productivity and improve services when there appears to be an increasing number of new burdens and considerations placed upon local authorities.

The recent waste reforms present another requirement for us to deliver whilst making it increasingly challenging to implement normal improvements and efficiencies to our waste service. Breckland have received capital burdens allocations for food waste collections which is significantly short of what we will need. We have estimated that we require approximately 10 vehicles, but funding will only cover circa 7. Also, no allocation has been made for communal bins, of which we have over 1,000. Breckland has commissioned an independent study which confirms, not only that the unit volumes are underestimated, but also the market costs have increased significantly. Furthermore, our depot does not have the space to house the additional vehicles needed. Therefore, additional costs will be borne by us directly unless this is funded through capital or revenue burdens funding. We have challenged our allocation with DEFRA, but not further allocation has been made.

Whilst the environmental benefits of offering a food waste service can be argued as a whole system, collections authorities will see their carbon footprint increase, particularly in a rural district in which capture rates are likely to be lower than in urban centres but where mileage covered is significantly higher. Collection authorities will be impacted by increased carbon emissions, whilst the disposal authority will benefit from carbon and financial savings for disposal. The revenue allocation is not yet known, and transitional funding has not yet been received, meaning the council will have to cope with this shortfall in funding and resources. This will impact the council's wider budget as well as put additional pressure on the existing service whilst planning and preparing for roll out, all of which will restrict future opportunities for efficiency in the current service.

Another burden placed upon us is the impact of Nutrient Neutrality. This unexpected barrier emerged a few years ago and has impacted development in a substantial proportion of the district. Whilst this issue remains unresolved, there will be a reduction in planning permission income combined with a lack of housing delivery. This issue has naturally consumed officer time as the council have sought to problem-solve and address the impacts of the issue, negatively impacting productivity. Also, the changes around Bio-diversity Net Gain (BNG) place a further requirement on Breckland as a local authority to resource the additional workload associated with the changes. This, coupled with the professional expertise needed to address the added technical, planning, and legal complexities associated with implementing these new measures, has significantly impacted officer time and consequently reduced productivity.



Appendix 1 – Overview of Breckland's Evolve Programme

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28 Onwards
Income generation	(183,000)	(313,000)	(348,000)	(348,000)
Contract renewals and changes	(276,000)	(462,000)	(462,000)	(462,000)
New ways of working and automation	(250,601)	(347,735)	(353,828)	(353,828)
External funding opportunities	(150,000)	(80,000)	(80,000)	(80,000)
Inspiring Communities	(105,500)	(105,500)	(105,500)	0
<i>To be identified during 24/25</i>	0	(306,765)	(265,672)	(371,172)
TOTAL	(965,101)	(1,615,000)	(1,615,000)	(1,615,000)



Appendix 2 – Health system-wide savings from Inspiring Communities

Service Area	Intervention Impact	Cost Per Person p/a	Impact over the course of IC	Calculations	Total
Community Health Workers (9 months)	Benefits of Community Navigators interventions on people engaging	£900	£233,712	200 households under the service (approx.480 people). 54.1% have asked for support. (480*54.1%*£900)	£616,327
	Reducing stigma and discrimination around mental health	£421	£12,209	29 referrals regarding mental health (29*£421)	
	Social Isolation	£9,537	£553,146	58 referrals (58*£9,537)	
	Breast cancer screening	£11,000	£44,000	See links below	
Social Prescribing	Reducing stigma and discrimination around mental health	£421	£83,779	199 referrals (199* £421)	£865,813
	Social Isolation	£9537	£782,034	82 referrals (82*£9,537)	
Daisy Programme	Social Value Evaluation	Social Value ROI £10 for every £1 spent	£300,000	ROI £10 for every £1 investment - £30,000 investment for Daisy per annum.	£300,000
Mindful Towns and Villages Programme	Reducing stigma and discrimination around mental health	£421	£42,100	100 Champions trained per annum. (100*£421)	£42,100
TOTAL					£1,824,240

Sources

- Benefits of Community Navigators
 - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cab32e5274a2f304ef5a3/dh_123993.pdf
- Reducing stigma and discrimination around mental health
 - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cab32e5274a2f304ef5a3/dh_123993.pdf#
- Social isolation
 - 58 referrals for support re social isolation and loneliness. 58*£9,537=£362,406.
 - [Loneliness Annual Report January 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/98421/Loneliness_Annual_Report_January_2021.pdf)
- Breast cancer screening
 - [Full article: Economic analysis of the breast cancer screening program used by the UK NHS: should the program be maintained? \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13600567.2017.1375000)
- Social Value Isolation
 - [HACT-WEMWBS-Report-8pp PRINT.pdf \(socialvalueuk.org\)](https://www.socialvalueuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/HACT-WEMWBS-Report-8pp_PRINT.pdf)

