

Solihull Council Productivity Plan 2024

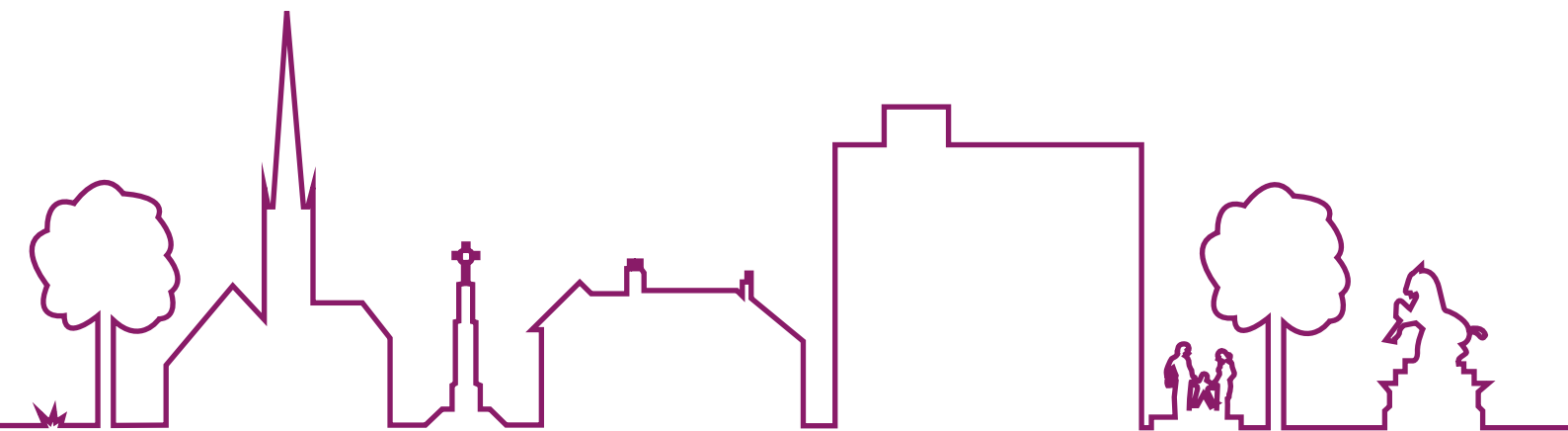
*Small enough to care, big
enough to make a difference*



Solihull
METROPOLITAN
BOROUGH COUNCIL

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Introduction

This productivity plan sets out our approach to delivering public services well, what we plan to do next, the challenges we face, and how government can help.

Solihull's **Council Plan** sets out the direction for the Council and the major steps that we need to take. People and communities, economic growth and the environment are at its heart, demonstrating that health and wellbeing, economic development and environmental sustainability go hand in hand.

Solihull is a well-run council. We have the 5th lowest council tax of 36 metropolitan councils and below average spend (the 14th lowest of the 36 in 2022/23). In the 2022 Place Survey, 84% of residents said that they were satisfied with their local area, compared to 79% nationally.

However, like other well-run councils across the country, we are facing significant challenges. In the final section of this plan, we set out how government can help.

Our challenges

Solihull is a key driver of the West Midlands' economy. Following sustained growth over the last decade, our economy supports more than 151,000 jobs and generates output worth over £9.32bn.

However, there is a 10-year age gap in life expectancy between our least and most deprived areas. Whilst we have succeeded in creating jobs, some of our people have struggled to access them. We are seeking to address this mismatch by:

- Delivering further and better economic growth in Solihull and ensuring that all our communities can participate and benefit from this growth. Our UK Central programme is seeking to unlock the economic opportunities in one of the country's most important development areas.
- Creating thriving places which are centres of our communities. We are developing and implementing masterplans for Solihull and Chelmsley Wood town centres. Through our North Solihull regeneration programme, we invested in 3 village centres, new housing and the rebuilding of schools.
- Taking action to tackle climate change that benefits communities and businesses and enables them to become sustainable.
- Taking action to support people into skills and employment, focusing on those at most risk.



The council has a strong track record in investing in growth to create opportunities for our residents and also fund essential public services. We have also levered in additional funding from a range of sources. However, we have reached a position where the costs of services cannot be met from the income that we are able to generate.

The reasons for this include increasing demand for adult social care, children's services, temporary accommodation and support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The cost of necessary improvements to children's services, the after-effects of the pandemic and an increase in overall costs due to inflation have also had a significant impact.

The budget approved by councillors in February 2024 showed that we need to deliver significant savings by 2025/26 to balance our budget. As we develop our Medium-Term Financial Strategy for 2025-28, we will build in the contribution that productivity can make to financial savings but this alone will not solve the problem.



Our approach to delivering services

We are pragmatic and utilise a variety of ways to provide services, based on what will deliver best value for our residents. For example:

- All highways and environment contracts have been outsourced through a highly competitive process. These contracts set clear performance standards and secure value for money for these highly visible front-line services.
- We work extensively with community and voluntary sector groups, leveraging their significant capacity to meet residents' needs. The Covid pandemic and joint work to address cost-of-living pressures are particularly good examples of this.
- We have recently re-established joint commissioning arrangements with health partners, to enable joined up care for children with complex needs.
- We are part of a shared resilience service with Coventry and Warwickshire.
- We have a significant shareholding in the Coventry and Solihull Waste Disposal Company. The dividends received generally exceed the costs payable to the company, reducing the Council's overall cost of waste disposal.
- Our arm's length company, Solihull Community Housing manages our council housing stock, to ensure that our homes are safe and a decent standard.
- We are one of eight councils across the West Midlands region that share ownership of Sherbourne Recycling Ltd, a materials recycling facility in Coventry. The plant utilises specialist technology to process dry mixed residential kerbside recycling in the most sustainable and efficient way possible.



Living Well in Solihull, our All-Age Prevention Strategy aims to help people to grow up well, live well and age well. It challenges us to 'think prevention' at every stage of life and make sure we work effectively together across partnerships. For example, through effective joint working with NHS partners on 'Home First', supporting people to return home from hospital as soon as possible and to maximise independence.



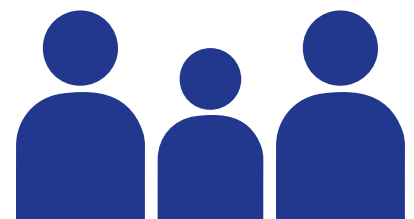
What we have already done to improve services

Seeking continuous improvement and the most efficient way of doing things is part of the Council's DNA.

Children's services continue to be our top priority for improvement. Our two key challenges are reducing the number of children looked after by the Council and increasing the stability of our workforce.

Sir Alan Wood, a commissioner appointed by the secretary of state for education, has worked closely with us to assess the challenges, steer improvement and strengthen services. Visible progress is being made, supported by our improvement partner Birmingham Children's Trust, and acknowledged by Ofsted in its most recent monitoring visits.

There have been improvements to our children's social care front door, assessments and planning. The quality of social work practice is improving, with still more to do to increase consistency. We have recruited more foster carers and opened two new Council-run children's homes, with a further home opening later this year.



Other recent **examples of improvement from across the Council** include:

- Adopting hybrid working has led to several benefits. This includes a reduction in waiting times for adult social care, financial savings such as reduced mileage, travel time and printing costs and increased employee satisfaction as demonstrated in our 2024 staff survey.
- Working with health partners to implement a single transfer of care team to improve co-ordination underpinned by the 'right care, right place, right time' ethos. We have already seen efficiencies, with less reliance on social workers, and better take-up of services to promote independence.
- Changes to our waste and recycling services resulting in improved recycling performance, increased service efficiency and better traffic management.
- Implementation of Family Hubs in areas of greatest need supporting the delivery of health, care and community services to children and families.
- We have put property responsibilities into the hands of specialists able to facilitate quality, best value solutions for the Council.

Investing where needed: We prioritise investment in areas that need it. For example, significant investment in the last three years in improving children's services. This has meant, however, that we haven't been able to prioritise some other services for investment.

Learning from previous decisions. A 2015 decision to reduce investment in children's early help services contributed to a subsequent increase in demand for higher cost social care. We have learned from this, with recent investment in developing an early help system with partners.

We will also **change things where needed** to get better value. In 2023, we implemented a decision to close our Urban Growth Company, a delivery model that had served its purpose, saving money as a result. We have brought our rough sleeper service back in-house, resulting in more people supported into accommodation for the overall same cost.

We also use **peer and critical friend challenge** to help improve our services. Examples in the last three years include Local Government Association Children's Resources & Efficiency and Safeguarding Peer Reviews, an adult social care inspection readiness review, a SEND Peer Review and peer support from East Midlands Shared Services with the implementation of the Oracle Fusion system.



Improvement is underpinned by **robust governance arrangements**, e.g., the Adult Social Care Continuous Improvement Board identifies areas for attention and ensures close focus until improvements are made. We review the effectiveness of our governance arrangements annually and make any changes needed.

What we plan to do next

I. Transforming service design and delivery to make better use of resources

As an organisation, to address our financial challenges, we will be implementing new operating principles over the next two years. Our new emerging principles include:



- A different way of serving customers through digital transformation.
- More efficient use of our assets. The delivery of many of our services does not have to be building-based.
- More capacity through partnerships and relationships with the voluntary sector.
- Simplified methods of service provision and reduced bureaucracy.
- Aligning service provision across the Council and with partners to remove duplication.
- Reducing our overheads in proportion to reductions in service costs.
- Reducing demand for services through effective prevention, early intervention and a 'first response' which minimises need for higher cost service provision.

We have developed our **People Strategy, 2024-27** to engage and continue to develop a workforce with the resilience to drive us forward as an organisation and increase our ability to meet resident's needs.

We will continue our children's services improvement journey in preparation for a full integrated local authority children's services inspection in Autumn 2025. The children looked after (CLA) rate per 10,000 population remains high but is falling because of a sustained focus on safely discharging children from care and robust oversight of requests for new episodes of care. In two years, we expect to be at the West Midlands average of 88 CLA per 10,000 children (432 children). This will be better for children and provide significant financial savings for the Council.

Further focus on prevention: we will fully embed a 'think prevention' ethos into everything we do and work with partners including the NHS Community Care Collaboratives to develop effective prevention services and approaches.

II. Exploit technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources

Digital transformation of how services are delivered to customers has been identified as having the most potential for cross-Council transformation and the delivery of more cost-effective ways of meeting customer needs. Our new customer services and digital programme will exploit this potential, delivering the right service in the right place at the right time.



We have created a digital roadmap for the next 18 months focusing on operational efficiency and further increasing our workforce's digital skills and competence.

We have solid foundations to build on:

- Oracle Fusion was implemented on time and on budget, with critical friend support from a neighbouring council.
- We have significantly developed our social care case management systems, introducing new forms to improve efficiency and working closely with staff to improve data quality.
- Establishment of the shared care record allows adult social care practitioners to access crucial health information about individuals they support without the need for time-consuming phone calls or emails to health professionals.
- Like many councils, we have adopted Microsoft 365 to enable effective videoconferencing, video communications, and collaboration through Teams and SharePoint.
- We are seeking to further exploit cloud technology to help automate tasks, reduce costs, improve security, enhance agility, and enable innovation.
- We have invested in a secure organisation wide data platform which includes powerful tools such as Machine Learning and we continue to monitor the potential to deploy Artificial Intelligence.

Data, Analysis and Insight: So that our decisions are based on the latest analysis and insight, we provide an accessible, up to date **evidence base** about the Solihull population on our website.

At present, data is stored in a number of locations, reflecting the complexity of current technology. This includes on-premises data, hosted databases and cloud technology platforms. Our ambition is to bring this together into a single data lake, allowing us to connect data to better understand and meet customer needs. There will, however, be a significant resource requirement to do this.



We are introducing a unified data-governance service (Microsoft Purview) that will enable us to manage and govern our data, meaning that report authors can find reliable and trustworthy data.

III. Making our money work even harder

We will continue to try to make our money go even further, including:

Asset management. We are developing an asset masterplan to provide efficient and sufficient accommodation for effective future delivery of services. We have let space in our offices to the NHS and to voluntary organisations, helping to meet residents needs as well as maximising income.

Capital spending is one tool at the Council's disposal to invest in services and manage demand. Recently, we capitalised funding to convert buildings for use as the new children's homes and to establish the Family Hubs, making better use of our existing assets and improving services.

We have acquired key town centre assets where this can unlock future regeneration plans. As part of this, we purchased Mell Square in Solihull Town Centre with a fixed interest rate loan of 2.01% for 50 years.



Invest to save. The Council sought approval for capital receipts flexibility as part of its Capital Strategy for 2024/25 - 2026/27. This enables transformation expenditure to be capitalised where we expect benefits in the future, for example within children's services. In recent years we have invested in replacing our streetlighting with more efficient LED lighting to save energy costs and reduce carbon emissions, as well as new ICT systems aimed at improving productivity and user experience.

Shared services. Alongside exploring other options, we are working with the NHS locally to explore opportunities, including joint 'front doors' and savings through joint procurement of activities.

We are part of regional frameworks for children's residential, fostering and supported accommodation placements and work in partnership with colleagues from across the region to identify where joint commissioning approaches can add value.

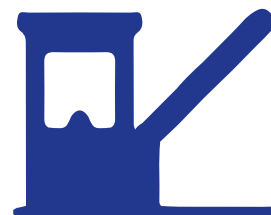
Working with West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). Solihull's decision to be part of WMCA was based on the economic benefit to Solihull and the region. To date, we have received a range of infrastructure investment supporting our growth plans while the arrangement to retain business rates generated in the borough has helped with our financial challenges.

Working with the other councils that make up WMCA, we are currently looking at the role of the combined authority. In particular, to ensure that there is no duplication in regional working and to make best use of our collective regional capacity.

Barriers that government can help to reduce or remove

Productivity gains and associated savings alone will not address the financial issues we face. Areas where government needs to help include:

1. Multi-year funding settlements to enable local authorities to forward plan, including timely publication of the Better Care Fund policy framework and that reflect increases in inflation, demand and changes to local context.
2. Confirm the position on extended capital flexibilities for local government, as suggested in the January 2024 consultation document.
3. Further funding or mechanisms to invest in transformation.
4. Use national levers to address structural issues in the children's placement market and improvements to financial regulation of adult social care providers.
5. Regulate the market for agency staff to assist local authorities in recruiting and retaining staff and control excess costs associated with agency recruitment.
6. Help councils address a range of workforce skills shortages within the market.
7. Review eligibility/funding associated with SEND and the growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) resulting from the 2014 Act. Review legislative requirements on mainstream schools to support greater inclusion of SEND pupils and help the system manage demand better. Ensure adequate and timely NHS support is available to avoid needs escalating.
8. Write-off accumulated Dedicated Schools Grant deficits - evidence now suggests it is not realistic to expect local authorities to fund these.
9. Reform home-to-school transport entitlement to make it more proportionate and affordable.
10. Remove legal barriers to using opt-out/auto award process for registering pupils for free school meals which has been piloted in some local authorities
11. Update temporary accommodation fees to reflect the reality of costs in today's housing markets to secure temporary accommodation.
12. Greater coordination of requests of local authorities from across government and reduce the number of data gathering exercises that we are asked to support.
13. Greater engagement with local government to co-design national policies to avoid unnecessarily complicated initiatives and funds.
14. Ensuring that any new regulation and inspection is proportionate, consistently applied and its benefits clearly established.
15. Local authorities should be fully funded for new responsibilities and new burdens.



How will we know if we have improved productivity?

Our Corporate and Directorate Leadership Teams use dashboards to monitor performance and productivity. The Chief Executive also receives a monthly oversight report from each Director detailing performance and challenges in each area.



The Solihull Local Outcome Framework and the Economic Strategy scorecard provide a comprehensive suite of measures against which we can assess performance in achieving our ambitions for the borough and benchmark against statistical and geographical near neighbours.

Other methods used to assess and report on productivity include case file audits and feedback from service users. Evidence of delivering outcomes for residents / customers is critical to how we seek to measure Council productivity.

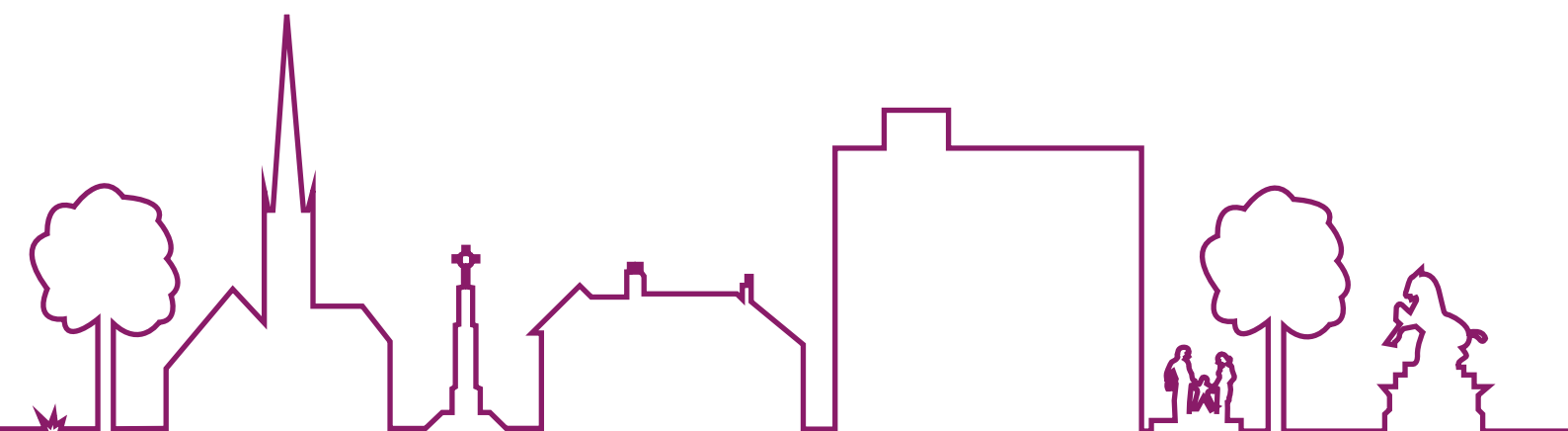
Following an external audit report recommendation, we are finalising a suite of approximately 40 key indicators to report performance to elected members in a consistent format.

We belong to several regional improvement networks and use data on similar local authorities to set challenging but realistic targets for performance improvement. Feedback from inspections and peer challenge also helps us to judge progress.

Requested information about expenditure

Proportion of staffing budget spent on agency workers	13.5% ⁽¹⁾
Proportion of staffing budget spent on consultancy spend	See below ⁽²⁾
Time and money spent on Equality Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) training	See below ⁽³⁾
Number of EDI champions	Approx. 50 ⁽⁴⁾
Proportion of pay bill is spent on Trade Union facility time	0.07%

1. Over half of the spend on agency workers in 2023/24 was in Children's Services, addressing recruitment challenges (a national issue) and supporting improvement. The use of, and spend on, agency workers is closely monitored.
2. The Council spent £8.4M using consultants for a variety of reasons to provide additional support and expertise in 2023/24. The majority of this spend (£7.3M) is related to significant infrastructure, planning for highways, traffic management, regeneration and other projects with only £0.2M of this spent on expert staff support. There was also £0.8M spend on contractors and consultants supporting the Council's new Oracle Fusion system implementation, an event that last occurred 20 years previously. Children's Services improvement has required £0.167M spend on staffing where additional consultant support has been required to make progress on Children's Services improvements at pace.
3. To ensure that the Council complies with the statutory duties of the Equality Act 2010, we deliver necessary and proportionate Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training. The Council does not corporately commission or purchase any external Equality Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) training.
4. We have three established staff networks (disability, ethnic minority, and LGBTQ+); each meets every two months for two hours, involving 45 employees out of a workforce of 2700. There are approximately 50 EDI Champions, each spending approximately 12 hours a year on this activity.



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