



Productivity Plan

Background

In a letter dated 16 April 2024, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) set out how local authorities were to develop and share 'productivity plans' to be submitted by 19 July 2024 and published on our website.

The plans are to set out what we have done in recent years, alongside our current plans to transform our organisation and services.

Plans are to consider the themes and questions set out in the table below.

Section 1 - How have you transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources.	
DLUHC Question	Answer
How has the organisation changed in recent years to become more productive?	<p>The Council has a duty to improve the delivery of our functions under the Local Government Act 1999. We seek to make improvements through better use of digital technology, sharing services, and innovative service delivery, including preventative work. We seek support and scrutiny from across the local government sector.</p> <p>The Council's cross cutting improvement programme, Building Our Future, is transforming our operations across multiple services. Improvement work is also underway within our planning, estates, and corporate functions.</p>

Since 2021 we have:

- Reorganised the management of the organisation into a structure based around three strategic directorates (replacing seven separate departments) designed to reduce silo working and costs, and increase productivity and collaboration.
- Adopted an adaptive council operating model creating a single Customer Delivery Team. This has brought together customer facing staff from across the organisation, who are now skilled in multiple service areas and able to support each other at busy periods, using a resolution first approach to customer contact, and moving away from switchboard services.
- Adopted hybrid working supported by an increase in the digital capability of our team and reconfigured our office space to support our new ways of agile working. The Council also has in place a human resource transformation programme and is developing a new People Strategy.
- Shared more of our office space with our local partners including the NHS, Police, and third sector organisations.
- Made savings of £625k through a vacancy review in 2021/22. Our Senior Leadership Team scrutinises every vacancy and request for staff resource. When a vacancy arises in our new Customer Delivery Team, we consider whether we are able to use new working practices or digital tools instead. We replaced 11 posts in this way in 2023/24.
- Developed a range of shared services with other councils (see below).
- Made various services available to residents online (see below). We are monitoring our channel shift work by tracking all our contacts to the Council, whether in person, by phone, by email or online, and studying the trends.
- Are using more of our data to measure performance of services and the impact of projects.
- Developed and implemented a new performance framework for the Council and a new approach to service planning to improve the links between the priorities set out in the Council Plan and service delivery/personal targets.
- Invited peer challenge from the Local Government Association to review our services and assumptions and provide challenge and fresh ideas, and we have actioned the recommendations made.
- We have worked in partnership with our main suppliers (grounds maintenance, leisure services, and waste and recycling) to identify and achieve efficiencies and financial savings (£50k in 2023/24) within existing contracts. By working in partnership, the Council has reduced costs (for

example related to energy consumption) without having a detrimental impact on the services provided to residents, albeit some services are now delivered differently, or when discretionary, may now incur a charge.

We have also made a range of other changes over the last few years which are having a significant positive impact on productivity, including:

- Bringing parking enforcement and the management of car parks in house, delivering financial and operational gains.
- Making operational changes to our Charter Market which have reduced costs, generated additional income, and increased productivity, ending a significant annual operating deficit and culminating in the market being named as the Best Large Outdoor Market in the Great British Markets Awards 2024.
- Investing in our workforce, which led to the Council being recognised in the 2023 Local Government Chronical Workforce Awards, winning the Best Next Generation Employer Award for 'growing our own – bringing in, and bringing on talent'.

See also:

- **The Council Plan 2024 – 2029:**
<https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Council%20Plan%202024-2029%20agreed%20by%20Council%2028022024%20FINAL%20web.pdf>
- **Customer Engagement Strategy 2021 – 2024:**
<https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Appendix%201%20-%20Customer%20Engagement%20Strategy%20%282%29.pdf>
- **Digital and ICT Strategy 2021 – 2024:**
<https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Appendix%201%20-%20Digital%20and%20ICT%20Strategy%202021-2024.pdf> This sets out the principles for our approach and the indicative timeline. A refreshed Digital and Transformation Strategy will be produced in 2024 setting out how we will continue to shape the organisation over the next two years.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council's new Performance Framework is set out at: https://stalbans.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s50065313/Strategy%20and%20Resources%20Performance%20Framework%2028%20September%202023.pdf • The Council's Parking Strategy, setting out our delivery of an efficient service that provides fair, easy, and safe parking across our District https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/publications/parking/Strategy/Parking%20Strategy%202023%20-%202028%20Final.pdf • Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge report and action plan: https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/local-government-association-peer-challenge
<p>How do you measure productivity in your organisation?</p>	<p>We use a combination of methods to measure productivity and identify opportunities for improvement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Output Metrics and Performance Indicators: These are the cornerstone of our Performance Framework and track delivery against key Council services, agreed and scrutinised quarterly by our four Service and Scrutiny Committees. We also track progress towards delivering the priorities set out in our Council Plan. We include an Outlook rating in our metrics, which indicates the RAG rating we expect for the following quarter and the rationale for that, giving a future dimension to our reporting. Our quarterly performance reports are published on our website: https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/performance-vision-policies-strategies-and-plans. • Efficiency Ratios: These help us to assess how effectively resources are used to produce outputs. Examples include use of deployed hours for parking enforcement, number of planning applications processed per planning officer, and the occupancy rates of our Charter market. • Benchmarking: We compare various elements of council performance against those of similar organisations to help us to identify areas for improvement and best practice. An example is the detailed work we have done to examine the costs and expenditure of our services against those of other Councils to inform savings plans and service reviews. We also use benchmarking data, where available, in our quarterly Performance Reporting for Service and Scrutiny Committees. • Quality Measures: We use quality measures including customer feedback, and compliance with regulations to assess service quality. An example is the metrics we produce for the Regulator of Social Housing. We report on complaints through our Performance Reports and collect feedback from customers using our online services. We consult on a range of service areas both through formal consultations and through surveys for specific programmes and projects.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome Assessments: We track and evaluate the long-term effects of some Council activities. We track the financial impact of the improvements we make and whether the anticipated financial benefits have been delivered. We have introduced an outcome focus to our Service Plans for 2024. Further examples include our independently conducted survey of resident perceptions which is conducted every three to four years (see: https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/performance-vision-policies-strategies-and-plans - our next survey is scheduled to take place in 2025 after a break due to Covid); and the tracking of measures within our Sustainability and Climate Crisis Strategy (see: www.stalbans.gov.uk/sustainability-and-climate-crisis-strategy). • Employee Performance: We assess individual and team performance through our staff performance processes. These include annual and mid-year reviews, regular performance conversations, and 1-to-1 check in meetings. We have an annual Staff Recognition Scheme where we celebrate excellence across a range of criteria. And we conduct regular pulse surveys with staff to take the temperature of the organisation on specific subject areas.
<p>What changes have you made to improve services, and what effects have those had?</p>	<p>Our plan, and the business case for investment can be seen at: https://stalbans.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s50057742/Appendix%203e%20SACDC%20Digital%20Investment%20Case%20-%20Outline_3101.pdf</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our Building Our Future programme is an example of improvement work which cuts across many services. This is overseen by our Building Our Future Board which tracks project delivery, savings, and impact on channel shift. • Since Summer 2023, we have delivered six new user flows on our website to allow customers to self-serve; for example, one is handling our tenant enquiries; another is handling complaints. Flows signpost residents to the right place for their query (which may be another organisation) and structure customer data to make it possible to handle it through automation. We use agile project management to support our ways of working. • Our data shows that the new flows have had good uptake from customers with over 1,200 enquiries per month currently being handled in this way (March to May 2024). Our developing data dashboards will enable us to see the emerging patterns of demand and the performance of services. While impact depends on the type of service and the needs of customers, through the work we are doing to monitor contacts into the organisation we can see that emails and calls are

beginning to reduce. For example, call numbers into our contact centre in the same period (March to May 2024) decreased overall by 11.66%, with some fluctuation over that time.

Month	2023	2024	%
March	3,423	2,667	-22.08
April	2,936	3,045	+3.71
May	3,347	2,862	-14.49
Total	9,706	8,574	-11.66

- We are making better use of surveys to understand the needs and perspectives of our residents, customers and stakeholders, and to seek feedback. Examples include tenant satisfaction and staff pulse surveys.
- Since 2023 more than 99% of residential parking permit applications have been made online (from a base of 63%) and over 14,000 visitor parking sessions have been booked through our digital service which is replacing the use of scratch cards.
- Following investment in our kerbside waste and recycling collections, the Council is consistently one of the top 5 recycling districts in the country and has been over multiple years.

What are your current plans for transformation over the next two years and how will you measure the effect of those changes?

- We are continuing our customer delivery transformation, based on the model set out in our Customer Engagement Strategy: <https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Appendix%201%20-%20Customer%20Engagement%20Strategy%20%282%29.pdf>.
- As we bring more areas of work into the Customer Delivery Team, we will automate further areas. We continue to review our digital systems to make sure they are good value and have the capability we need. We will replace those that are not performing well.
- Measurement of the changes will include tracking staff numbers, customer contact, channel shift and resident satisfaction.
- While still at an early stage, we have started to use data tools such as Power BI to make better use of our data for improving our understanding of service performance and to drive improvement.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council will be commissioning an independently conducted Resident Survey to take place in 2025. This, alongside our data scrutiny insights, will inform further development of our work on service transformation.
<p>Looking ahead, which service has greatest potential for savings if further productivity gains can be found? What do you estimate these savings to be?</p>	<p>Our analysis of the areas for potential channel shift, which could potentially provide productivity and efficiency impacts, are listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licensing/regulatory/environmental services • Development management • Housing surveying/asset management • Housing options • Museum operations <p>In some areas we will need to invest in new systems before additional savings will be realisable. Work continues to assess the potential, and the investment required.</p>
<p>What role could capital spending play in transforming existing services or unlocking new opportunities? If you have already used capital spending to boost growth or improve services, we would be interested in learning more.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has a capital investment strategy and plan in place which sets a framework for the Council's capital spending priorities as well as its approach to investment decisions. • Investments include property development activities, digital and information technology programmes, transformation activities, and invest to save initiatives and enabling projects. • The Council has received significant Government funding from the Green Homes Deal Local Authority Delivery 1B, and Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund Waves 1 and 2.1 to improve energy efficiency and lower carbon emissions in Council dwellings. Bids for future funding opportunities will be made as set out in our Housing Energy Strategy, to make the Council housing stock carbon net neutral by 2030/31, ready for when the national grid is fully carbon neutral. <p>See: Property Capital Investment Strategy: https://stalbans.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s50065857/Capital%20and%20Property%20Investment%20Strategy.pdf Housing Energy Strategy: https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/HRA%20Energy%20Strategy%202022.pdf</p>

<p>What preventative approaches you have undertaken and can the value of these be quantified?</p>	<p>Examples of our preventative approaches are set out below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are underpinning channel shift by enhancing and extending digital services, improving access and quality, and reducing face to face opening hours. The latter releases more staff capacity to help those residents who need additional assistance. • We have launched a subscription-based garden waste collection service for those residents who have gardens and wish to subscribe to this discretionary service. This avoids those without gardens having to pay for a service they do not need. • We are managing service demand through our combined customer service delivery team (see above), moving our staff resource to deal with fluctuations in demand across multiple services. • We are adopting a fabric first approach in our social housing decarbonisation work, and using swimming pool covers in our leisure centres to reduce heat loss and reduce energy consumption. • We have upgraded the lighting in our museum and gallery transitioning from older halogen and fluorescent bulbs to energy-efficient LED alternatives. The impact is a 13% reduction in energy consumption and savings of £1,400 a year. At the Civic Centre, we have installed occupancy sensors in the basement and meeting rooms and will shortly complete similar works elsewhere in the building. We estimate savings of approximately £1,000 as a result and reductions in energy consumption which we will be able to quantify in the coming months. These upgrades reflect our commitment to improving energy efficiency and reducing operating costs through sustainable practices. • We have developed a new tree strategy to provide a managed approach to tree safety and sustainability. • We have developed strong local partnerships e.g., with community safety partners (including sharing intelligence on anti-social behaviour, reducing the potential for crime), and with Third Sector partners (such as Citizens Advice St Albans – to help prevent people from falling into debt and homelessness difficulties). • We have improved security measures to reduce the risks of cyber-attack and data leaks. We have increased the use of cyber defence tools and invested in the knowledge development and training of our team. • We have invested in the District's sports and leisure facilities, and our parks and open spaces, to help people to stay fit and socially connected (St Albans District has one of the top ten healthiest populations in the country – see: https://uk.news.yahoo.com/healthiest-unhealthiest-areas-england-wales-
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<p>Are there wider locally-led reforms that could help deliver high quality public services and improve the sustainability and resilience of your authority?</p>	<p>What we have done, or are doing, so far:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed to achieving 100% carbon net neutral Council housing by 2030/31 (Solar panels; internal, external and cavity wall insulation; loft insulation; window and door upgrades; improved ventilation; and led lighting. All our Council homes will have an EPC rating of C or above. £10.2m matched funding has been secured so far through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. • Building homes for people on our housing register. We have delivered 92 new social rent properties since 2016 with 26 more due for completion in 2025. Registered Providers operating locally have delivered 672 affordable homes of mixed tenures over the last decade. • Developed a new Tree Strategy providing a framework for developing the District’s treescape while managing it in a safe and sustainable manner that will encourage biodiversity and nature recovery. • Installed leisure centre solar panels improving energy efficiency and reducing the cost of electricity and progressing our efforts to decarbonise our assets (Harpenden Leisure Centre panels funded through Sports England Swimming Pool Support Fund). • Reviewed our Car Parking to promote modal transport shift, improving road safety and accessibility to/for disabled residents/visitors. • Making progress with the development of our new Local Plan – due for Regulation 19 Publication in October 2024, with planned submission in March 2025, and adoption March 2026. • Adoption of a ‘Find out if you need planning permission’ service – using the Government Digital Grant we have adopted this customer friendly tool to provide better guidance on when planning permission is required. We are also working towards having an AI Validator tool examining submissions to automate this technical process and we are working towards an

Intelligent Pre-application Service (also using the Open Digital Planning Funding) to improve the quality of householder applications.

Our plans for the future

- **Housing Decarbonisation** – future funding applications will be made to help the Council achieve its objectives set out in our Sustainability and Climate Crisis Strategy and Housing Energy Strategy.
- Our new **Local Plan**, once adopted, will improve sustainability across the environmental, social and economic spheres – delivering improvements to many aspects of sustainability including: provision of new green spaces, tree planting, biodiversity net gain, increased flood resilience; large scale rooftop PV provision; new employment land; new homes and affordable homes; new sports pitches; increased access to the countryside; new walking and cycling infrastructure; improved public transport provision; and new schools and GP facilities. The new Local Plan will also increase resilience by providing greater certainty over locations and types of planning applications coming forward in future years, consequently reducing speculative applications and freeing up officer time.

Other locally-led reforms that could help

- Freedom and funding for Hertfordshire to develop county-led bus schemes, which could be tailored to meet the needs of local residents and employers, ensuring that routes, schedules and services align more closely with community demands, provide reliability for workers, and make public transport more attractive to residents.
- Wider use of combined funding streams and engaging more with our community to part-fund community facilities – our experience in developing our new award winning Cottonmill Community and Cycling Centre showed us that the use of community-raised funding (c. £79k) and that drawn from a variety of different sources for quite different purposes (e.g., Public Health - Mind in Mid Herts surgeries; Sports – cycle hub provision), can help us achieve good results for our community with the application of creative thinking and community engagement.

Section 2 - How have you transformed the way you design and deliver services to make better use of resources.

Question	Answer
<p>How you plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision makings, service design and use of resources.</p> <p>What are your existing plans to improve the quality of the data you collect; how do you use it and how do you make it available to residents?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our plan is to make the best possible use of the systems we have, and to develop our customer facing services and our internal processes. We have capability for automation within a number of our systems. We will switch and configure that capacity through a rolling programme of improvements and give our staff the skills and confidence to make best use of these tools. • Recent examples include the roll out of a digital document signing platform across the organisation and much greater use of the Microsoft Office 365 platform. We recently undertook a comprehensive survey on skills confidence and uptake of Microsoft 365 to use as a baseline. • The new online services we are building, and the rich data that they provide, are allowing us to develop associated data dashboards and automated reporting to improve management control and to track and monitor customer interactions, repeat calls, phone volumes, email, and survey outcomes. We are working iteratively to increase the quality and use of this data. As we migrate to new systems, we are working to improve the quality and use of the data we hold. • Our new complaints system has enabled us to provide quicker and more insightful reporting to our senior managers about complaints, service requests and compliments. • We are making good use of cloud-based systems to remove use of our physical infrastructure and improve resilience and security. • We are redesigning services to remove process steps and to streamline and harmonise different services with similar customer journeys. • We are making information more easily accessible both for residents - who are able to track service requests, and for the Council - which is able to track the reduction in email traffic and the rise in submitted digital service requests. • We are consolidating service options to focus delivery on specific channels where customer service quality can be maximised. • We are making better use of Sharepoint to improve our data resilience and our ability to collaborate across services.
<p>How often do you share data with other</p>	<p>Some examples where we find sharing data useful are included below:</p>

<p>organisations, and do you find this useful?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We make use of benchmarking data, for example through LG Inform, which helps to understand the extent to which our services are performing relative to other similar councils. • We share information with partners for example on anti-social behaviour and CCTV operations; such sharing of intelligence is useful both for preventative and reactive operations. • We share information and statistical data with county partners which helps with cross border joint working such as on waste and recycling, and fly-tipping. • We share information and data with neighbouring authorities and further afield in order to benchmark delivery, learn from best practice and collaborate on service improvements (e.g., through local, regional and national networks)
<p>Are there opportunities to use new technology to improve workflows and systems, such as predictive analytics and AI?</p>	<p>There will be opportunities for us to develop use of these new tools as part of the revised digital strategy we are currently developing. We will want to make sure we select those that will help us to deliver the priorities set out in our Council Plan. We are looking at a first use of generative AI in our pre-application service for planning applications.</p>

<p>Section 3 - Your plans to reduce wasteful spend within your organisation and systems.</p>	
<p>Question</p>	<p>Answer</p>
<p>How do you approach identifying and reducing waste in the organisation? How do you monitor progress?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has developed a well-defined budget challenge process and a clear road map towards setting a balanced budget. In 2023/24 this helped us to make savings of £2.3m, and in 2024/25 further savings of £2.4m. We have also developed a RAG approach to budget proposals indicating the extent to which proposals are achievable and providing early insight into whether savings are on track to be delivered. • The Council undertook a Local Government Association 'Peer Challenge' in February/March 2023. This service helps councils to understand the extent to which they are performing well, and to provide ideas to help them develop further. Details including the Peer Panel's findings can be found on the Council's website: https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/local-government-association-peer-

challenge. The Council's subsequent Action Plan can also be found at this link, together with the Panel's report after their follow-up visit in December 2023. Our follow up Action Plan on Peer Challenge Recommendations was considered by the Council's Audit and Governance Committee in September 2023 and by the Strategy and Resources Committee in November 2023 and June 2024.

- The independent Peer Panel made a number of observations related to reducing expenditure. “In discussions with officers, it was clear SACDC is a lean council with many officers responsible for multiple functions.” “SACDC, like many other councils, has been hit hard by the financial impacts of the pandemic, rising inflation, cost of living, high energy costs, the pay award and reduced income streams... The council was able to set a balanced budget without the use of reserves. Tough decisions were made to raise council tax to the maximum amount allowed without a referendum, increase fees and charges, introduce new fees, pause elements of the capital programme, make savings within services and use funds from successful grant applications.”
- A range of positive steps already taken were observed by the Peer Panel in February/March 2023 including:
 - Launching an asset review programme with a view to realising the potential of around 700 Council-owned assets. With guidance and scrutiny from the Corporate Property Board, this programme has the potential to deliver significant savings.
 - Instigating and delivering a sounder fees and charges framework which provides potential for the council to build on.
 - Reviewing the number and value of contracts affords opportunities to make savings from improved procurement practices and contract management.
 - Reducing the very significant discretionary service spend (£4m compared to statistical near neighbour's average £2m) by continuing to consider what to stop doing, reduce or deliver differently as it has already done with Abbeyview golf course, Rothamstead Park and the athletics track.
 - Exploring opportunities to deliver services with partners and stakeholders, either through formal partnership arrangements (legal, building control, planning enforcement and internal audit), grants (climate champions), leases (Rothamsted Park) and other models such as Local Authority Trading Companies.
 - Developing the second phase of the transformation programme (Building our Future) to redesign the operation of the council.

- The Council's Corporate Property Board oversees the development and delivery of the Capital Strategy and Capital Programme. The scope of the Board includes both the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the General Fund programmes and includes property development and other assets for which capital funding is required. The Board provides an important Council-wide perspective on the delivery of the key projects within the capital programme.
- In an effort to create a corporate model for the management of the Council's land and property portfolio, the Corporate Property Board receives regular updates on the management of the Council's assets, including potential opportunities for alternative uses, including disposal. The purpose is to facilitate discussions on which opportunities and/or specific assets should be taken forward for a more in-depth review of options and challenge.
- A rolling programme of asset challenges ensures best use and value is achieved and feeds into a wider asset management strategy. The aim is to identify assets which might be:
 - disposed of for a capital receipt,
 - suitable for potential future development,
 - leased to generate a revenue income; or
 - included as development sites in the Local Plan (sites with a reasonable prospect of being developed between now and 2041).
- We have recently agreed a new approach to capital receipts from property disposals. Capital receipts from freehold disposal of assets will be used to reduce the overall level of borrowing or reinvested into other agreed capital projects. A proportion of the capital receipt from disposals is earmarked to be invested back into future capital projects, including the planned maintenance of the Council's retained assets. This aligns with the recently refreshed and approved capital strategy.
- The Council's Digital Design Group meets to consider digital applications, integration and forward planning of digital projects to maximise efficiency and resilience.
- We have recently reviewed telephony contracts, consolidated our telephony lines and reviewed our use of mobile phones to maximise best use of resources.
- We have instigated a number of paid for discretionary services which are helping to close the budget gap. This includes services for businesses related to non-regulatory aspects of food safety, planning pre-application advice where full cost recovery is achievable, and a subscription-based garden waste collection service.

<p>Where have you followed invest to save and what was the result?</p>	<p>Examples of where we have used Invest to Save in recent years include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment (£75k) in energy measures across various sites which is forecast to reduce energy consumption and repay investment within 3 years. • Implemented the Building our Future programme which is an investment of £1.3m over 3 years. So far this has delivered annual savings of £490k and is forecast to achieve a further £115k in annual savings. • The redevelopment of a former youth club site to provide 7 houses for private sale and reinvested the surplus achieved from the sales to contribute to funding the new Sopwell Community and Cycle Centre located close by. • Agreement has been reached to remodel parts of the Civic Centre in 2024/25 (an investment of £41k) to enable a hospital trust to lease part of the civic offices which will secure additional annual rental for the Council.
<p>How much time and money do you spend on staff EDI training (internal and external), networks and other programmes? How many EDI Champions do you have as an organisation? How do you log and report the time and money spend on EDI related activity? How do you assess the effectiveness of that training?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our staff spend in this area in 2023/24 equates to c. £30,000 including on costs (the equivalent of about 0.5 of a post). The Council's Community Engagement, Equality and Grants Officer works with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Partnership Group which includes 20 volunteer Council staff diversity champions, other community diversity champions, community partners and faith groups, to formulate and develop our work in this area. • Much of our training is delivered in house; the rest is funded through revenue funding and grant money. In 2023/24 we spent £3,920 (revenue) and £5,332 (externally sourced grant funding) on training in this area. • We have provided Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion training for all managers. We also make use of information available through trusted third parties including SOLACE (www.solace.org.uk/equality-diversity-inclusivity/ - links to a recent report on EDI data reporting in local government), Local.Gov (www.local.gov.uk/our-support/equalities-hub/equalities-diversity-and-inclusion-leadership (for elected councillors), LLG (www.llg.org.uk/about/llg-webinar-emerging-equalities-scope-of-transgender-non-binary-and-gender-fluid-equality-protection-menopause-issues/ - of particular interest in HR matters), and In Equilibrium (www.in-equilibrium.co.uk/equality-diversity-resources/). • We assess the effectiveness of training through feedback and evaluation from participants and as part of our performance conversations and review meetings with staff.

- Our strategy in this area is designed to promote integration and a sense of shared community, and to help the Council meet its duties under the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- Our current Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2022-24 sets out our strategic objectives, our approach and our action plan. See: <https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/St%20Albans%20City%20and%20District%20EDI%20Strategy%20July%202022.pdf>
- The EDI strategy, and the action plan are agreed by councillors through the Council’s Housing and Inclusion Committee. Officers are currently working to refresh our strategy and the updated version for the coming period will be considered by the Committee in November 2024.
- A Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge in 2023 said of this strategy in their follow up report: “There is a positive approach to equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across the organisation with strong political engagement.”
- The Peer Group Panel felt that the Council needs “to embed [the strategy] fully within the council; it needs to be integrated with service planning and the Council should maximise the impact of equality impact assessments, and as such a review of the resources allocated to this priority is recommended” suggesting a greater need for resourcing rather than a lower need.
- Our approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is further set out on the Council’s website at: <https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/accessibility-equality-and-diversity>

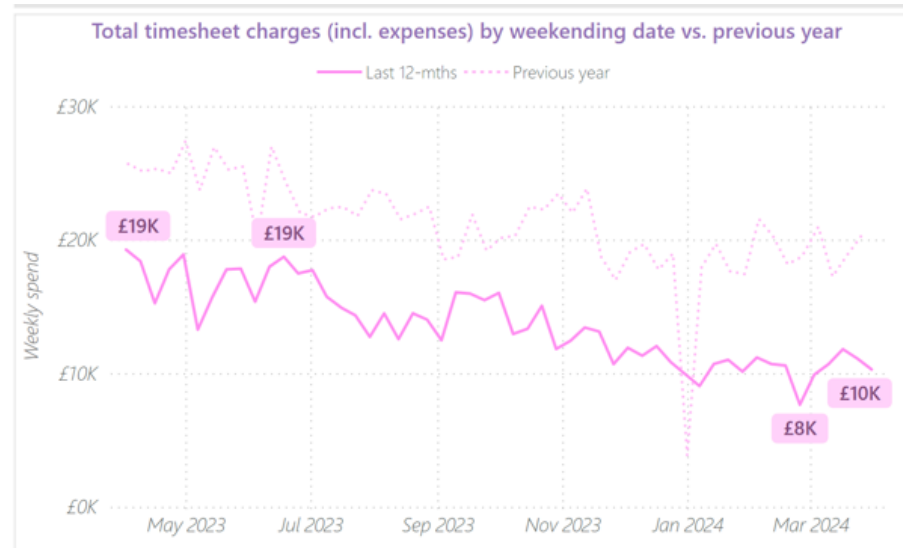
What percentage of total staff budget is spent on a) agency, and b) consultants? How do you assess value for money on agency & consultancy spend and what are your plans to reduce use / costs? How many of those consultants or agency staff have been in place for over a year?

Our staffing budget (2023/24) is set out below:

Expenditure	Budget £	Budget %	Actual £	Actual %
Salaries	20,868,970	98%	19,492,373	95%
Agency	112,960	1%	820,757	4%
Consultants	215,360	1%	161,722	1%
Total Staffing	21,197,290	100%	20,474,852	100%

- Agency workers comprise approximately 4% of the total staff budget. Use of agency temps is tightly managed and monitored, reviewed and authorised at Senior Leadership Team level. All other options are explored by Service Managers before use of agency workers is approved and so use tends to be in the hardest to fill roles such as project management, planning, legal and finance, and/or where there are income or compliance needs.

- Consultants are used on a 'contract for services' basis and to deliver specific specialist services, reports or project work (e.g., tree surveys, health and safety advice, design work). Consultant spend is equivalent to less than 1% of the total staff budget.
- Under our contract for temporary agency staff, we regularly review spend and work with the contractor to keep rates realistic in comparison to the market but limit agency mark ups.
- The graph below shows the Council's declining use of agency temps and spend over the last 2 years and the trend continues to be downwards (29% decrease in spend through our contract in 23/24 compared to the previous year).



At the end of 2023/24 we had 9 live agency bookings and of those, 5 workers had been with us for a year or more. These are in the legal services, planning and capital projects areas where it has proved difficult to recruit or where specific skills are needed for project delivery.

What governance structures do you use to

- The governance structure at both council decision making level and officer level is well defined and adhered to.

<p>ensure accountability of spend?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In preparation for approving the annual council budget, the Strategy and Resources Committee considers the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and sets the parameters (such as expected staffing and non-staffing inflation, level of Council tax increase, interest rates for borrowing etc.,) for the following year's budget. • Within these parameters the four service and scrutiny committees consider their budget and identify proposals for change. Proposals are categorised as either service growth or reductions, additional income generation or efficiency savings. The recommended proposals from each service and scrutiny committee are presented to the Strategy and Resources Committee who collate the budget for the whole Council. This budget is subsequently presented to Council in February preceding the start of the financial year. • Once the budget is set, officers are responsible for delivering services within the budget envelope. Budget responsibility is clearly defined. The Senior Leadership Team receives monthly budget monitoring reports and risks and opportunities are identified and reported. • The forecast outturn figures and explanation for any significant variances to budget are reported to the Strategy and Resources Committee through our performance monitoring reports.
<p>Do you share office functions with other councils and if so, how useful do you find this?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We actively seek opportunities to work in partnership and collaborate with our neighbouring authorities to achieve resilience and efficiency. In the last 2 years the following sharing arrangements have been established or entered into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shared Legal Services (St Albans District Council is the lead authority) - shared with Watford. ○ Shared Internal Audit Service (Broxbourne Borough Council is the lead authority) - shared with multiple councils. ○ Shared Planning Enforcement and Building Control (Watford Borough Council is the Lead Authority). ○ Hertfordshire Shared Anti-Fraud Service (housing tenancy fraud). ○ Herts Home Improvement Agency - shared service for disabled facilities grants (private residents/housing associations). • We are currently developing a shared service proposal for Human Resources/Organisational Development, with several councils in the initial discussions. • Business cases for entering into each shared service arrangement vary but key principles of our approach and thinking are:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resilience - to ensure access to niche/specialist resource and better respond to demand/capacity fluctuations; ○ Savings - to be more efficient in the way in which we deliver services for our communities. <p>For further information see: https://stalbands.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s50057519/Appendix%20E%20-%20Shared%20Service%20Principles.pdf.</p> <p>The current shared service arrangements are relatively new and there are still some areas of work to be completed to fully realise the business case benefits, but resilience has already improved with greater access to specialist skills and resources when needed.</p>
<p>If you share external training costs with neighbouring councils, how do you factor out duplications of service between your council and your upper-tier council (if you have one)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We work collaboratively with neighbouring councils where timescales and required outcomes are similar (e.g., Health and Wellbeing focus during Covid). ● We have an arrangement with Hertfordshire County Council, agreed during their training procurement process, to be named as one of the local authorities that can access their contract/providers when we need to. This gives us access to a wide range of provision, although if we can procure at lower overall costs, we will always go for the best value delivery option. ● We also work collaboratively with neighbouring authorities to share training opportunities so that we can maximise delegate numbers, reduce the per head cost and share the expenditure accordingly (e.g., specialist training such as on Health and Safety matters).
<p>If you have one, what is your assessment and experience of working with an elected mayor, combined authority, or devolution deal?</p>	<p>We work with the Hertfordshire Growth Board where all 11 Hertfordshire authorities collaborate on cross county matters.</p> <p>Ahead of the spring budget in March 2024, Hertfordshire, alongside seven other county councils - Surrey, Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, and Somerset - were invited by DLUHC to express their interest in a standard Level 2 devolution framework agreement, subject to securing local support via MPs and district and borough councils. A level 2 deal offers additional powers over adult skills and bus franchising without the requirement for a directly elected mayor.</p> <p>An offer of a deal to Hertfordshire received the support of borough and district councils and the majority of local MPs. Despite widespread support, Hertfordshire was not announced for a deal</p>

	alongside Surrey, Buckinghamshire, and Warwickshire. The expression of interest set out that to fully realise Hertfordshire's economic potential, we call for a deeper devolution deal, devolving powers with greater freedom, flexibilities, and an integrated multi-year funding settlement to drive local growth.
What proportion of your paybill is spend on trade union facility time?	The proportion of our pay bill spent on trade union facility time is 2023/24 was 0.07%. See: Trade Union Facility time report 2023/24 - https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Trade%20Union%20Facility%20report%2023-24.pdf

Section 4 - The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.	
Question	Answer
<p>What do you need from government, the market or elsewhere?</p> <p>What are the barriers preventing you from improving services further?</p> <p>Are these barriers consistent across multiple services?</p> <p>What would you need to remove those barriers?</p>	<p>We need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A multi-year finance settlement. We need a settlement covering a longer period than the current 1-year arrangement, and with a longer lead in time, to allow us to plan more effectively and reduce costs. For example, our ability to invest in latest or new technology solutions is limited. This is the most significant central barrier to local productivity. Without a clear indication about funding for multiple years, councils cannot effectively plan and deploy their resources. • A whole infrastructure approach to bidding for funding, rather than piecemeal bidding for small grants. We are not arguing against competitive bidding, but bidding for small amounts of funding allocation, often with tight restrictions and short delivery timescales that limit the local impact and are not joined up, is wasteful and requires a disproportionate use of staff time to manage. • An end to specific, formula-based revenue grants and their separate reporting requirements – it would be much simpler and more efficient to roll all specific grants into a single provision in the Local Government Finance Settlement. • An end to complicated, inconsistent, and misaligned processes for submitting data returns to central government.

- **Simplified financial statements for District and Borough Councils** – the requirement to produce statutory accounts, publish information under the transparency code, and the requirement to value assets for accounts every year, and the time and cost of this work, is disproportionate to the size of organisation, and does not produce value for the effort we are required to expend. If audited statements are to continue, completion of these need to be expedited. Councils struggle to get auditors to prioritise the completion of their accounts, hence why so many are overdue.
- **A release on the limitations on Council Tax increases**, for example those that are lower than inflation. The current requirements do not allow the tax base to grow sufficiently and are detrimental to the long-term resilience and sustainability of councils.
- **The freedom to charge less for services that are paid for by direct debit** as an incentive for people to switch to that payment method which is much more cost effective for councils. Currently we are prohibited from doing this for equality reasons.
- **Allowing councils to charge fees that cover the whole cost of services.** For example, we welcome the incremental increase in the planning application fees we can charge, but the costs still do not cover the Council's costs. Fees that are capped or set by central government are below full cost recovery, meaning that the general taxpayer must subsidise the service through Council Tax. This stifles our ability to use Council Tax in more impactful and productive ways. Another example of this is the premises or personal licence to sell alcohol. A general removal of caps to allow cost recovery is needed. Without this, inward investment and preventative work, including greater support for businesses, is less likely. Ultimately, we would like the freedom and flexibility to make all fees that are chargeable for non-discretionary services, cost neutral – so releasing our reliance on Council Tax subsidies for chargeable services.
- Linked to that, **the repeal of obsolete legislation is needed** – for example the rules around charitable collections which mean we are unable to make charges for the cost of administering the service.
- Also linked to this, **councils need to be permitted to raise income above costs incurred for discretionary services to fund unrelated front-line services** – currently our ability to do this is very limited. An example is Garden Waste collection services. We need the ability to charge market rates and apply proceeds for wider public benefit.
- **Removal of the ambiguity on Green Belt development from the National Planning Policy Framework and associated guidance.** The current ambiguities lead councils into conflict as

there is much community misunderstanding of the requirements and lack of clarity from government.

- **A move away from the tendency of Whitehall to design and decide policy that affects councils without engaging with us as fully and as early as it could.** This can result in initiatives and funds that are more complicated than necessary and that are difficult and, in some cases, costly for councils to implement. We would support much closer policy co-design between central government and local councils.
- **Quicker decision making, and more notice given by Government to councils** – both in terms of notification of what will be included in new legislation, and of implementation dates. A recent example is the notice on Simple Recycling legislation. Another example relates to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund: The deadline for submitting Investment Plans was 1 August 2022. Detailed guidance was not supplied until 19 July - less than 2 weeks before the deadline. The guidance was updated in March 2023, altering some of the outputs and outcomes 7 months after submission of the Investment Plans, which moved the goalposts. The UKSPF funding for Year 1 was due in October 2022, but there were significant delays. We were told on 6 October that we would be notified in October. Instead, grant determination letters were not received until December 2022, with a couple of additional requirements, and the funding was not received until January 2023. This made it difficult to proceed with the 2022-23 projects, as we did not know until the end of Q3 2022-23 that funding had been approved. A further example is Covid grants: every time Government announced a new scheme, businesses immediately started approaching us about how to apply as the Government directed people to their local council for more information, e.g., the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant. This was announced by the Minister on 21 December 2021; guidance was supplied on 30th December 2021; there was a webinar from BEIS on the guidance on 10 January 2022, FAQs and clarifications we made available on 18 January 2022; the application closing date for the scheme was 28 February - less than 6 weeks after the updated guidance was received. This makes things unduly difficult and costly for councils.
- **More joined-up working between central government departments** on issues such as housing, homelessness prevention and asylum dispersal.
- **A greater Government understanding of the impact on councils, and alleviation, of the hidden costs of Subject Access, Environmental Information, Freedom of Information requests and similar matters, and action taken to limit their use** – these were originally set up to improve transparency for the consumer, however they are much abused by suppliers, students

and vexatious applicants. In 2021/22 we had 756 requests, rising by 11% in 2022/23 to 842, and then by 16% to 975 in 2023/24. In the past, we have used the costing that central government uses (£250 per case) as an indication of how much this is costing us. On this basis, and taking out SARs which take substantially longer, we calculate 928 cases in 2023/24 equates to a cost of £232,000. This is another example of services that Councils must provide but cannot charge for in the majority of cases.

- **Government using its influence to shape the digital landscape** – we welcome efforts from Local Digital and Open Digital Planning to help Government help councils to make better use of digital technology for residents. The Future Councils pilot report in March 2024 identified ‘a huge opportunity to achieve sector-wide digital transformation quicker and at lower cost through sector-level collective action’. We would welcome Government support to enable this, and to tackle some of the barriers where the sector collectively cannot do this. This includes working with suppliers to provide products specifically for local government, leading the development of critical technology and making best use of combined buying power. Currently we find digital systems excessively expensive to develop and sustain and we do not have bargaining strength with the monolithic suppliers involved in the sector. An example is our reliance on Salesforce; we would like Government to help councils to make best use of joint buying power. An example of where this has worked well is the discounts arranged for councils with Microsoft – allowing us to save 20%.
- **Government investment in the Judicial system** - to provide additional capacity for criminal cases so we have a chance of getting our civil matters heard in a timely way.
- **An end to statutory requirements to place notices in newspapers or issue written copies of routine notices** – this is outdated in the digital age and is costing Councils a lot of money.
- **More support to deal with the drain on resources of dealing with the irresponsible actions of a growing number of subscribers to a variety of unfounded conspiracy theories.**
- **Simplification of the requirements on Councils made by other public and government agencies** and regulatory bodies seeking “to the letter” compliance with their statutory codes – we find we have to jump over excessive hurdles; simplifying requirements would allow us to get on with delivery more quickly and efficiently. Examples include matters related to Ancient Monument sites and the Environment Agency.
- **Ability to prioritise local suppliers** for economic development purposes.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to withdraw council services to people who refuse to pay their Council Tax, similar to commercial providers who can withdraw services if people do not pay for them. We refer here to people who wilfully choose not to pay their Council Tax, rather than those who are unable to pay. |
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