



South Staffordshire Council Plan 2020-2024

The Council Plan 2020-24 was produced following consultation with our communities. Prior to developing the plan, our first Place Narrative was created, and used our Locality Profile and data sets to inform the priorities of the plan.

One of the key features of the 2020/24 Council Plan was the introduction of the Five Delivery Arms, which were integral to the delivery of the priorities, supported by a suite of performance measures which have been regularly reported on through the Integrated Performance Management report.

The Five delivery arms:

Financial Stability

Create a Business and Community Hub

Working with our Communities

Embracing Technology

Flexible and Skilled Council

When we went live with the 2020/24 Council plan, the pandemic struck our communities and we went into lockdown, however this didn't stop us delivering on our priorities. It reaffirmed our ability to be flexible and adapt to the environment.

Whilst the first two years of the plan were disrupted, we delivered on our priorities, pushing ahead with the delivery arms, alongside the pandemic there has been further challenges of Brexit, global wars, and the ongoing cost-of-living. This report summaries some of the key aspects of delivery against the five delivery arms.

Strong Finances • **Strong Communities** • **Strong Council**

Financially self-sufficient

Service - Locality focused

Agile and adaptable

Financial Stability

At the time that the Council Plan for 2020-24 was approved, the 2020/21 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) predicted that the Council's General Fund reserves would be £3.029m by the end of 2023/24. The provisional outturn position for 2023/24 is now **£8.116m**, an increase of approximately **£5.000m**.

There are several reasons for this increase, but it is worth understanding some of the issues that the Council has had to deal with over this period of time. The first is the global COVID pandemic which occurred as the Council Plan was approved. Central Government provided additional funding to local authorities which was sufficient to cover costs resulting from the pandemic. However, additional work was also required such as the distribution of grants to businesses to support them through this period and support for the local community. The Council successfully took on all the additional tasks required of them.

The Council has worked with 1-year financial settlements over the Council Plan period, and there has also been Brexit and the Cost-of-Living crisis which added to the existing uncertainty around local government funding. This uncertainty is one of the main reasons for the increase in General Fund reserves. For several years, Central Government has proposed implementing a funding reform and a Business Rates Reset which would mean a reduction in the Business Rates income the Council is able to retain (the most significant funding source for the Council). As a significant risk this reduction has been built into the MTFS each year resulting in a forecast reduction in General Fund reserves, but the reform/reset has not materialised.

Other Council-led initiatives that have contributed towards the increase in General Fund reserves were the introduction of charging for green waste collection and the decision to borrow to fund the Capital Programme at a time when borrowing costs were at their lowest. Whilst the Cost-of-Living crisis has increased inflationary pressures across the Council, it has also meant that income from treasury investments has been greater than budgeted due to interest rates remaining high.

Key drivers of the Council plan were operating in a more commercial and transformational way. This has included the purchasing of commercial properties to lease out, changes in the way customer services are provided and greater digitalisation. This has enabled additional income to be generated and savings to be realised to cover budget pressures without the need to reduce service provision.

A significant change in funding for the Council is the additional Section 31 grants that are received to fund Business Rates reliefs provided by Central Government. Since COVID, these reliefs have increased significantly and now represent a much higher proportion of the Council's Business Rates income than previously budgeted.

The improved position of General Fund reserves for the Council will help to mitigate the risk arising from the ongoing uncertainty around local government funding along with providing a more stable footing for the delivery of the new Council Plan priorities for 2024-28. The table below shows the expected General Fund reserves position per the 2020/21 MTFS and the actual position:

2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
7,815	6,340	4,552	3,029
7,894	9,295	8,672	8,116

Key Outcomes

The council's commercial portfolio has delivered its income target of £2m in rental income per annum, money used to help deliver core services and helping provide financial stability.

We have made payments of £454,680 in Discretionary Housing Payments to those struggling to manage shortfalls in rent or requiring rent in advance to move to more suitable accommodation.

Energy rebate - Paid **35,460** council tax energy rebates, the total value of the rebates was £5.3m.

Another ambitious development project is the partial retail-led redevelopment of Wombourne Enterprise Park, a large 1930s factory building and three more modern blocks. Investing £7.6m in the demolition and redevelopment of the site, having secured Lidl as an anchor tenant, with an additional large retail unit and small commercial block. The development is due for completion later in 2024. It will support job creation, economic wellbeing for residents, and the financial resilience of the local authority.

The performance of the councils' cemeteries has also evolved and improved with a renewed focus on the revenue driven from the sale of plots. This was driven through several marketing campaigns designed to increase residents' awareness of the services available. A re-alignment of charges, in line with the local market was carried out to further drive the financial performance of the service. For the first time the ability to pre-purchase plots with several payment options was offered by the council.

Street Scene continue to look for ways to innovate and secure income generating opportunities and in 2020 launched a commercially driven arboricultural service. The service undertakes private work in the district and surrounding areas as well as undertaking work on the Council's own tree stock. This approach means the service is generating revenue whilst also reducing the Council costs of using external contractors to maintain its own trees.

The team completed a major construction project, expanding Four Ashes Enterprise Centre attracting businesses into the 32 new units, providing a space for economic growth and circa £80k per annum to the MTFS.

2021 also saw the completion of a £1.45m 1,200 sqm extension to our largest single unit on Four Ashes Industrial Estate to enable our existing tenants to expand their business and generating additional income.



Business Grants

Distributed 7,699 grants in total to support business through the COVID-19 pandemic. The total value of the grants was £35.2m and all were paid in a timely manner.

We have made payments of £23m in Council Tax support to those on low incomes.

Since the launch of the garden waste collection service in 2020 the service has provided on average a net contribution to service overheads of **£390,000 per annum**.

DFG's - We manage a budget of £1.2m per year to people to stay in their own homes by making essential renovations. We have supported 388 residents to remain safely in their homes.

Circa £3.4 million investment into the council's four leisure centres, to support our community's health and wellbeing.



Create a Business and Community Hub



The Codsall Community Hub project involved investment in the council's outdated 1970s headquarters including: a major refurbishment, extension, increased car parking, improved environmental performance, installation of electric vehicle charging points, and transforming the way services are delivered, enhancing the value of the asset, and generated a significant income stream (£670k PA). Throughout the pandemic, the council held its nerve and reviewed the business case, taking the decision to proceed. Taking a commercial approach, the project was cost-neutral to the taxpayer with new revenue income offsetting the £10 million construction cost. The Hub is now a building the community can be proud of, hosting a hive of activity - from the café to the library, nursery, and GP surgery - plus a plethora of voluntary sector organisations and businesses. The council and its partners across public, private, community, and NHS sectors are now integrated into a modern, energy-efficient working environment.

Through the Business Place Partnership (BPP) we have created Locality Partnership Hubs across the district. Some of the hubs focus on a particular sector (hospitality, manufacturing), and are differing in their needs and relationships with us. We have fostered relationships with ambassadors for each Locality Partnership hub, and with them, developed an offer to support their hub and sector. The hubs provide a gateway 'open door' to business support services.

Key Outcomes

Codsall Community Hub opened in 2022 officially by Staffordshire's Lord Lieutenant and coincided with a visit from the Queens baton relay for the commonwealth games over its tour of 72 nations. The building won Gold at the IESE public sector transformation awards and has since firmly bedded itself into a thriving community venue benefitting a whole host of organisations and visitors.



Partnership working – working with social prescribers, Local Support Teams to provide support through Creating Brighter Futures.

Businesses are supported to run safe and successful events. Event numbers are increasing - last year over **130,000** people enjoyed events across the district.



200+ businesses are now members of the South Staffordshire Business Partnership, which was set up in 2021 to provide a better understanding of the issues faced by local businesses, both for different sectors and localities, and an opportunity for businesses to better engage with the Council.



Food premises are maintaining a high rate of compliance (regularly over **90%** of our food premises are 3, 4 or 5 rated at inspection). Over **400** interventions undertaken at food businesses across the district.

We've hosted **15 networking events** based around key issues such as inspiring tomorrow's workforce, climate change, corporate social responsibility and business support. The Partnership also has a further 22 strategic partners who work with the businesses providing a range of different options covering a wide range of support from exporting to skills for example.



2023 saw the launch of 'Enterprise In South Staffs' programmes, funded by UKSPF, which has radically changed our approach to the delivery of business support. We've created a variety of programmes supporting businesses in different phases of their life cycles from start-up support to innovation programmes to green solutions, with a corresponding grants programme to provide businesses with practical support, and financial resources, for them to develop and grow and bring further economic prosperity to the district.

We've also been working with key partners to develop employment & skills plans with the developers on our key strategic employment sites to maximise the job opportunities available for our residents. On the i54 South Staffordshire development, over 50% of the thousands of jobs with the different employers on that site, come within a 10-mile radius, many of them in the district.

As other key employment sites start to develop out at West Midlands Interchange and Logic54, there will be thousands of further new jobs that we are working to ensure that our residents have access to by ensuring we have the commitment with the developers to support employment and skills plans at the outset of their developments.



We have established the **South Staffordshire Business Ambassadors Group** made up of 8 local business people from locally important differing business sectors, business sizes and geographies to help shape and steer the business partnership, support and challenge delivery of the partnership pledges, champion their own sector, locality and the district, and providing peer support for local businesses. The group wanted to focus on education and skills; to better link schools and business to meet the current and future skills needs of our businesses.

Working with our Communities



We began our Locality working in 2008, and in 2020, in line with the Council Plan we rebranded our working arrangements to Localities+ and enhanced the package of support available to the three tier of members, our communities and businesses. Prior to the onset of the pandemic we had created 6 Locality Enabler roles, all officers who held substantive roles within the Council, who took on additional responsibilities and who would effectively become the 'eyes and ears' of their assigned locality.

Throughout the timeframe of the plan the Localities+ agenda was enhanced as we introduced 3 tier virtual member forums focusing on strategic as well as local issues, providing a platform for local members concerns. In the early days of the pandemic the Locality Enablers took on a key role assisting their communities in responding to the challenges they were facing from the pandemic, including the high street recovery programme and corporate resilience work.

In 2023- 2024 there were **11,389 walker attendances** (an increase of 534 from 2022-23).



There is a regular programme of walks taking place across the district, currently **67 volunteer walk leaders** and walks are organised in the following localities.

- Locality 1** **Penkridge**
- Locality 2** **Coven**
- Locality 3** **Cheslyn Hay, Great Wyrley, Essington**
- Locality 4** **Perton, Bilbrook, Codsall**
- Locality 5** **Baggeridge, Kinver, Highgate Common, Wombourne**

The Place Narrative and Locality Data Profile have been refreshed to include Census 2021 data.

Since 2020, there has been some tremendous success which included developing strong relationships with the Police, DVLA, housing association and neighbouring local authorities to support community safety initiatives.

Introduction of Wildflower Meadows and Bee friendly areas across the district in direct consultation with residents and members, enhancing biodiversity and empowering communities to decide how highway verges are maintained.



Home visits – average of 400 a year, supporting those who are unable to get into the office to discuss their claims, access support, or to apply for housing benefit/ Council Tax Support online.

As part of a joint working pilot agreement involving the Council and County Council our Street Scene Team undertook several environmental projects on behalf of and funded by County Highways. A total of 40 sites throughout the district were highlighted and attended to as part of this pilot where it was thought they would make a difference to the community and would be clearly seen. Sites included footway clearance, splitter islands, gateway improvements and hedge overgrowth cutting back, before and after pictures were taken and shared on social media.

Key Outcomes

Penkridge Leisure Centre and Wolgarston High school were successful in bidding for Capital funding Swimming Pool Support Fund – Phase II, adding Photo Voltaic (PV) panels to site to reduce costs.



Wombourne Parking Pilot, working with local members regarding parking issues in Wombourne, the Council, Police and County Council are working together on a scheme to monitor cars parked in the village and assess whether the parking is inconsiderate and if intervention is required.

4th August 2020 saw the official opening of the new play area at Baggeridge Country Park and the park continues to maintain its green flag status (25 years).



Everyone Health - Service level agreement in place for their weight management programme. This provide good synergy between signposting to our leisure and health offer. Everyone Health also offer health checks to residents and have supported many Council and Community events to showcase their services and carry out health checks.

Provided support around the cost-of-living impacts - Attending warm hubs and other local events - have attended village fairs, community engagement events, drop-in sessions including Locality 3 projects and jobs fair.

Building Better Opportunities – worked with **1,322 residents** of Stafford and South Staffs, supporting 716 who were economically inactive when joining the programme, 243 of whom moved into employment. 944 of those on the programme reported fewer barriers into employment as a result of the support they received.

Creating Brighter Futures – currently working with over **130 residents** to improve their career prospects through training and volunteering.

We enable our residents to access £14m of Housing Benefit per year - working with our communities

The service also engaged further with Parish Council's to assist highlighting residents' duty of care in employing someone to dispose of waste on their behalf – to reduce fly tipping and illegal waste carriers.



Good relationships have been built with Housing Plus Group with reductions in reported damp and mould cases and the time taken for defects to be repaired.

We have introduced two new Locality Enabler role to focus on Community Engagement and Digital.

Supported **184** homeless households in 2023 up from 118 households in 2022.

Virtual ward walks with Local Members, CLT and Locality Enablers – leading to the additional environmental team pilot to focus on members local priorities.

Embracing Technology



The Council Plan has witnessed a seismic transformation in the council's ways of working as well as the way council services are accessed and consumed by South Staffordshire residents and the wider community. This transformation has been underpinned by embracing technology and supported by the continued development of the council's skilled and innovative workforce.

Technological advancements have enabled enhancements to both voice and digital communications, providing greater opportunities for residents to self-serve where and when they wish to but also retaining the ability for them to meet with staff in person when preferred; digital by choice not by default has increased customer contact channels.

During the period of the Council Plan, threats aimed at disrupting the efficient and effective working of the council and the provision of services to residents have grown exponentially; many of these threats being targeted at the same enabling technologies that have supported the council's digital transformation. Protecting the availability of council services, for both residents and staff, has been a key consideration and priority, contributing to the overall financial stability of the council.

Embracing technology has been at the heart of Business Transformation and Digital Services contribution to the Council Plan, with the adoption of technology being an enabler of the other Council Plan priorities.

Innovation and transformation, the continued adoption of Cloud technologies and cyber security and resilience will continue to be enabling priorities for the new Council Plan.

Key Outcomes

The number of residents signing up online for the Garden waste collection service has increased to **90%** = circa 28,000 sign ups online per annum.



Establishing any time, any location, any device access to council digital services by improving the website and web content, providing intuitive online forms for frequently requested services, promoting digital inclusion by improving online accessibility and providing accessibility tools for those with neurodiverse needs.



Implementation of Leisure Hub allowing leisure members to book classes and session via digital channels.



The grounds maintenance function has continued to evolve and improve. Further work using Routesmart software to detail cutting routes around the district has been utilised to exploit further efficiencies. This has resulted in freed up time that has been 'cashed' to undertake further income generating work.



Supporting the transformation of the Community Hub through the removal of telephone handsets, reducing printers and printing, introducing digital signage, installing audio visual and video conferencing facilities in meeting rooms.

Enhancing the council's protection from new and emerging cyber threats, being the first UK council to adopt a novel military grade cyber defence.



Advancing the council's resilience and business continuity arrangements through the adoption of cloud technologies and services, with payroll, HR, all telephony, committee management (CMIS), website, online forms, email, SharePoint, Teams and data backups all becoming Cloud hosted.

Enabling agile and hybrid working practices through the introduction of laptops, Office 365, Teams, mobile phones and remote support capability.



A monthly digital **Community Safety Newsletter** introduced with over 2,000 residents signed up.



Flexible and Skilled Council



Our workforce development strategy has aligned our culture, working arrangements and people strategy with the transformation of our Community Hub and digital working technology, supporting our employer of choice ambitions and the council's wider community leadership role in facilitating local employment and skills.

This has been in the context of post-pandemic recovery challenges, including a changed and more challenging recruitment market, a fragile economy, and a cost-of-living crisis impacting on our communities and workforce.

2023 employee engagement survey

- 96.25% Would recommend the council as a place to work.
- 8.8* Good relationship with my manager
- 8.7* Satisfaction with leadership
- 8.8* Inclusive organisation
- 8.8* Happy and safe with my work environment
- 8.2* The council cares about my wellbeing and supports me in balancing my work and personal commitments.

* average rate out of 10

Since our website launch, the diversity of our workforce has improved, for example: 22 employees have declared they are from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to 14 the previous year; 18% of our workforce are aged 25 or under - a 4% improvement on the year before; and our mean gender pay gap was 4.87% (previous year was 6.53%).



Coordinated efforts since 2020 have seen South Staffordshire Council buck national trends and reduce instances of fly-tipping year on year.



We have seen a four-fold increase in enquiries from work experience students and maintained our level of apprentices, with five securing permanent employment with us. 20 work experience placements in 2023.

Retention rate has improved by **4%** since 2022, now 88% - bucking the national trend.

We have successfully recruited in key skills shortage areas including Finance, Environmental Health, Planning and Elections – where there are recruitment challenges within local government.

Key Outcomes

In 2020 following an internal review Street Scene became responsible for tackling the strategic and operational approach to tackling environment crime across the district. The service had traditionally been the operational solution for dealing with instances of fly tipping, littering, removal of graffiti etc.



Since 2022, our candidate reach has expanded to new areas as far away as Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Wales, and London, helping us compete for talent in the toughest skills shortage areas.

We have redesigned jobs with upskilling and diversity – using our talent management programme as a platform to support rising stars, we have tracked individuals and continued to support their development and career progression. Approximately a third of delegates benefiting from career progression or further educational attainment.



50% of our appointments have been internal candidate, reflecting our investment in our workforce and upskilling.



Agile working, adaptable and flexible – meeting customers in the community at venues close to them

Service has invested in training to ensure that staff are suitably qualified and gain the skills they need to provide a quality service. 3 staff have completed IRRV Apprenticeships. Team Manager has completed IRRV Honors qualification. Housing Manager has passed level 3 Housing Management qualification and moving on to level 4.

Demonstrating our success

Our residents will tell us - 89% would recommend South Staffordshire as a place to live.

Our Staff will tell us - 96.25% recommend the council as a place to work.

Our performance tells us - Consistently meeting our Council Plan targets.

Our peers tell us - LGA Peer Review, national awards/recognition.

In 2023, we have maintained resident satisfaction levels at around 90% since 2022, and our staff satisfaction has increased by 2.75%.

Awards and recognition as a council:	
iESE:	IESE Council of Year 2022. Certificate of Excellence in 2023: Employer of Choice Strategy. Gold award for the Council's Senior Leadership Team in 2020. Gold award Localities + Programme 2022. Gold award Codsall Community Hub in 2022 and shortlisted for Local Government Chronicle award. Achievement of Excellence Certificates for our Local Plan Consultation and our Employee Wellbeing Programme during Covid 2022.
Royal Town Planning Institute:	Named Planning Authority of the Year - West Midlands in 2023. Chair's Special Award in 2023 for the way our planning team has worked to develop and nurture staff talent. Shortlisted for National Planning Authority of the Year 2023.
Green Flag Awards 2023:	Baggeridge Country Park - 25th consecutive year. Wom Brook Walk - 14th consecutive year.
Health at Work:	Workplace Wellbeing Charter in 2023.
APSE:	Street Scene team named Service Team of the Year: Street Cleansing and Street Scene Service (Public Realm) in 2023.
Municipal Journal:	Highly Commended Senior Leadership Team 2020.