

Response to Simon Hoare's letter of the 16th April 2024

To answer the questions in order:

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

In recent years, the Council has undergone significant change to continue to stay ahead of the financial challenges that face local authorities. Notable changes include:

1. Subsidiarity in action

Implemented a new Organisational Model that removed middle management layers and pushed decision making to Service Managers. With only four hierarchical layers between CEO and frontline staff, the council operates a lean, agile and empowered workforce. This saved the organisation an estimate £500,000 per annum.

2. Homelessness prevention

Cost saving and avoidance of circa £500k pa keeping families out of bed and breakfast. New initiatives focussing on prevention and high risk groups, has been implemented such as Housing First, Debt, Housing and Community advice services and working with regional partners has eliminated the use of B&B for all except the most complex, high risk cases.

3. East Cambs Trading Company (ECTC)

This is a wholly owned company that was established by the Council in 2016 and has two divisions: Property Development and Commercial Services.

ECTC has been able to deliver its business plans because of its ability to generate income from its activities in both Property and Commercial Services. In 2016 the Council agreed a 5-year £5m loan facility to ECTC as a general loan and in 2018 agreed a further loan of £1.5m which was ringfenced to deliver the Former MOD site in Ely. By 31st March 2024, ECTC will have paid £1,527,705 in interest to ECDC. In addition to the loan interest ECTC has delivered £3,409,823 of financial benefit to the Council.

ECTC Commercial Services - Ely Markets

This business area is a great success for ECTC. Since 2016 Ely Markets has increased its revenue by 29% and year on year has delivered profit to ECTC. Investment in Markets has been achieved without cost to the Council as all investment has been paid from service profits. As well as financial return to the company Ely Markets has provided a vibrant market that has generated millions of pounds of spend into the local economy.

ECTC Commercial Services - Grounds Maintenance

In 2017 the Council awarded a 10-year maintenance and management contract to ECTC to deliver Grounds Maintenance services on its behalf. Over the years ECTC has increased the number of sites that it maintains on behalf of the Council and has not increased the management fee that was agreed in 2017. Furthermore, ECTC was able to offer a £100,000 discount on the management fee for each of the years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. This represents an overall saving to the Council of £300,000.

ECTC has been able to include additional sites and offer a discount because it has been able to generate income from other organisations and has used the profits to invest in the service and offer discounts on the management fee to the Council where appropriate. In 2023/24 ECTC generated 29% of its income from other organisations.

ECTC Property Development

Since 2016 ECTC has delivered 170 homes, with 44 of these being affordable housing units delivered through Community Land Trusts, enabling people to live and work locally.

4. East Cambs Street Scene (ECSS)

This is a wholly owned company that was established by the Council in 2018 to deliver the Councils Waste and Street Cleansing Service. The service was previously contracted to Veolia. Contracting the service through a wholly owned company has enabled the Council to have better control of both the cost of the service and the quality of the service provided to the community.

5. Introduction of a Corporate Plan

In 2015 the Council introduced a new and focused Corporate Plan which in turn facilitated the production of Service Delivery Plans. It is through these documents that productivity is measured.

Both documents are focused on the key priorities of the Council (in addition to statutory duties). This enables the Council to focus spend and finite resources on outcomes related to the corporate priorities.

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

ECDC signed the Digital Declaration in 2019 and has taken a targeted approach to Digital Transformation, by taking advantage of digital tools and new data sets where there is a clear business need and an opportunity to implement system changes (for example end of contract life) rather than whole sale, big scale digital projects, that can be costly and not deliver the organisational improvements being sought. The targeted approach follows the principles of GDS guidelines, that advocate for an

agile methodology that responds to service and customer need. This includes projects such as:

Digital Planning - Currently we are part of the Open Digital Planning Programme focussing on opening our GIS data sets for our Conservation Areas and Tree Protection Orders. This will enable residents and planning agents to access previously locked away data and improve the quality of planning applications at the outset.

Line of Business Systems - Over the past 12 months we have undertaken an audit of our largest line of business system, which provides the primary platform for front line services such as Planning, Environmental Health, Housing, Building Control. A programme of digital improvements is now scheduled, with the aim to remove duplication and manual handling of data, increasing mobile working, and allow improve self-service for customers

Service redesign – In 2023 the Waste and Street Cleansing services were fully digitised and include mobile working and in-cab technologies for management of services and allow crew reporting, fully automated back office processing allowing efficient use of resources and round planning, new data reporting to show efficient use of vehicles for reducing mileage and fuel reduction. GIS plotting of all street assets, to enable effective scheduling for maintenance, emptying and replacement. Finally, the system enables end to end automation of customer service requests relating to bins enquires and reporting missed bins.

Customer Services – The Council committed to funding a new website to enhance functionality, data access and transparency, and secure end to end customer requests. The project kicked off in April 2024 and the discovery phases are now concluding and procurement for a digital platform will commence.

Land Registry - The Council is migrating its data to the Land Registry and using the new burdens payment to further digitise and update the Local Land Charges service offered.

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

Spending plans are robustly produced each year and detailed in the annual budget and medium term financial strategy (a further three years) and then monitored by senior management and councillors on a quarterly basis during the year.

The Council is continually looking for opportunities to provide the services its residents want at the lowest possible cost and its success in this can be witnessed by the fact that it has not put up Council Tax for the past eleven years.

The use of agency staff is kept to a minimum with less than 1% of the overall wage bill spent on such a resource and consultants only used where a specific skill set is required for a one-off task.

The Council purchased an e-learning package on EDI which was rolled out to all staff and councillors in December 2021, 85% of recipients completed the course by the deadline.

East Cambridgeshire is part of the Anglian Revenues Partnership, a partnership of five district councils across Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, providing efficiencies in the processes linked to Council Tax and Business Rate collection, Council Tax support and the payment of Housing Benefit.

4 – The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove.

Finance

The Council has a balanced budget for the next two years and has frozen its element of Council Tax for eleven consecutive years. However, it is difficult to develop a robust Medium Term Financial Strategy while uncertainties around future funding levels from government in terms of single year Local Government Finance settlements and regarding business rates review, new homes bonus and more generally, the overall level of Government funding remain.

Providing multi-year settlements would provide certainty and enable the Council to make robust medium – long term financial decisions and plans.

Competitive bidding and onerous reporting processes for Government funding is time consuming and resource intensive, schemes often have complex eligibility requirements and very short deadlines for applications.

Process and bureaucracy

More support for local decision making.

Lack of data sharing with other Government departments for example NHS and DWP can be a barrier to delivering effective, multi-agency projects.

We are unable to plan accordingly for the significant changes set out in the Resources and Waste Strategy and other proposed legislation due to the continued delays and lack of detail.

A further barrier to progress is the volume of new burdens and additional requirements that have been passed to local authorities which divert the Council's time and resources, often at short notice and with little consultation/input from local authorities. Awarding grants via Local Authorities for example to sports centres and parish councils is an additional administrative burden on Council.

Areas where updated policy would improve productivity include:

- New Local Plan making guidance
- Removal of NPPF Footnote 37 to enable the local communities to determine the size of CLT developments in their area.

- Change of policy to allow District Councils to retain 100% of business rates receipts from all renewable energy NSIP projects (regardless of size).
- Introduction of a long-term solution to the way Internal Drainage Boards are funded. The Council has limited control over its payments of Internal Drainage Board levies and through work with the LGA Special Interest Group, we encourage the Government to consider an alternative way of funding these.