



Cheshire West
and Chester



SHARED PURPOSE

How Cheshire West and Chester Council is collaborating to shape a stronger future



Successful organisations never stand still and that's why Cheshire West and Chester Council is striving to build a more collaborative future inside and outside the organisation



[DELYTH CURTIS chief executive]

Resetting the

It speaks volumes about the kind of organisation you are when – despite running strong services, winning awards and being held up as an example to others – you still want to hit the reset button.

From the lengths it's going to mitigate climate change to being one of the first authorities to declare a poverty emergency, Cheshire West and Chester Council pushes the boundaries of local government.

Indeed, a Local Government Association peer review team described it as 'an impressive and ambitious council with an established track record of providing high quality services, strong financial management and robust governance'.

The council asked the team to examine its approach to community engagement and health and care integration. Both are undeniably areas of strength for the authority, but they also highlight an acute awareness of the challenges ahead.

The borough is, in the council's own words, a microcosm of Britain. From the historic city of Chester and industrial Ellesmere Port to market towns like Northwich and swathes of beautiful countryside, it's an area of contrasts.

Some parts live up to Cheshire's leafy and affluent stereotype, but this is also a part of the country where 25,000 people are among the country's 10% most deprived and more than one in 10 live on an annual income of less than £15,000. In some areas there is a gap in life expectancy of more than nine years.

The council has been proactive in dealing with these issues, for example by creating a network of community inspirers whose lived experience is shaping responses to the poverty emergency and by taking a leading role in health and care integration locally and at a sub-regional level. It's part of the Cheshire and Merseyside Marmot Community set up to tackle health inequalities and

overseen by Professor Sir Michael Marmot.

The council also has an ambitious programme of regeneration that reflects the importance of tailoring investment to differing needs (see page 4).

But leader Cllr Louise Gittins and chief executive Delyth Curtis believe it will require collaboration and engagement on a scale never seen before to truly tackle the borough's challenges and sustain local services by embedding co-design and co-production.

Labour members formed a new administration after May's elections with voters backing their 'manifesto of hope' based on building a fairer future. Cllr Gittins, who also led the council during four years of no overall control, believes it's crucial the spirit of collaboration that formed during Covid between officers, members, residents and partners continues.

'It changed the dynamic, brought us closer together and we came out of the pandemic stronger as a result. We want those principles of cooperation and collaboration and the need to nurture co-production to continue. We're dealing with deeply ingrained issues and we need to work better with our partners inside and beyond the authority's boundaries to tackle them.'

On a practical level, that means creating more shared workspaces. The council's modern new headquarters in Ellesmere Port, The Portal (pictured below), is also home to partner organisations including Citizens' Advice and Jobcentre Plus.

It has also set up four integrated employment hubs called Work Zones that bring together a range of organisations – including local businesses – to provide a comprehensive range of tailored support to help residents enter employment.

The council has big ambitions to fully embrace the power of technology to transform services. This builds on successful programmes which have doubled the proportion of contact local

people have had with the council through its digital platforms such as its brand-new website. Agile working, new data tools, assistive technology and low code platforms to automate services have also been key over the last few years but the organisation wants to go much further. A new digital and ICT service is being designed and the council will soon be looking to appoint a senior individual who can take the organisation to the next level. It's an exciting time and a career-defining opportunity for someone to lead this change.

One of the most tangible signs of change is the consultation currently under way to create the first-ever borough plan that will set out the shared priorities of the council, residents and partners for 2024-28. It's just one example how the council has taken on board recommendations from the LGA peer review team around community engagement and implemented them. When the team returned earlier this year they were impressed by the speed of response – from expanding the network of community inspirers to embedding a more strategic approach to co-design and co-production.

'This is a council that has strong core values and is reputationally sound. But we need to reimagine the council,' explains Delyth, who became chief executive earlier this year having previously been deputy chief executive of health and wellbeing and NHS director of place.

'We have to be more inclusive and be an outward-facing council. It's critical to us being successful and a big part of that is building on the strength of our partnerships.'

One of her key priorities is to establish the council as an employer of choice. The council runs a wide range of initiatives, from staff networks and its EDI programme, Be You, to a highly successful Women into Leadership scheme. Ultimately, it's about creating an environment where everyone can thrive and develop their careers.





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'Like most local authorities, we have skills shortages in some areas that we struggle to recruit to. We're striving to be an employer of choice by not only providing a great working environment in terms of open plan offices but also by showing we take work-life balance very seriously through hybrid working and supporting people to succeed and ensuring they get the reward and recognition they deserve.'

On both the officer and member sides there is a focus on succession planning to nurture the next generation of politicians and senior managers.

'We are conscious of the age profile of our workforce and we need to bring through our rising stars,' says Delyth. 'We now have younger talent coming into the organisation as apprentices and graduate trainees.'

She wants staff, many of whom live in the borough, to be ambassadors for promoting the council as a great place to work. It's reflective of a broader goal to encourage more staff to explore activities outside the council, whether it's through volunteering – everyone gets two days a year to carry out voluntary work – or representing the authority on external bodies.

'I want us to be a progressive organisation regionally and nationally and part of that comes back to being outward facing, sharing lessons from our successes while learning from others.'

Delyth adds: 'We've gone through a recovery period since Covid and there's a renewed energy as people come back into the workspace. It feels like a different environment and staff are feeding back to us that they feel part of something again. With a four-year administration in place and a four-year co-produced borough plan coming together, I think it's an exciting time to be at the organisation.' ●



Creating a supportive working environment is at the heart of the council's goal to be an employer of choice

Building a reputation as a great place to work starts from within – and that's exactly the approach Cheshire West and Chester Council is taking.

Front and centre are a range of activities designed to ensure that regardless of your background and characteristics, everyone feels valued and supported.

The council runs regular Colleague Connects webcasts to engage staff and talk about different subjects. Most recently it was used to launch Be You, an EDI programme designed to create an inclusive environment that celebrates differences and ensures people are able to feel comfortable simply being themselves.

It's complemented by a range of staff networks covering everything from race equality to LGBTQ+ and a people panel that works alongside trade unions to continuously improve policies and approaches.

Leader Cllr Louise Gittins, whose background is in leadership and management training, believes putting your values into practice is the best way to break down barriers.

The council's Women into Leadership programme has been running for eight years and given the leader and deputy leaders of the administration

and opposition are all female, as well as the chief executive, there are plenty of role models.

'When Delyth was made chief executive I said: "we've cracked the glass ceiling!";' says Cllr Gittins. 'You need someone to be an inspiration to show there's career progression at the council.'

A variety of well-established pathways enable staff to develop their skills and experience, gain qualifications and even act as ambassadors at jobs fairs and colleges.

As well as offering flexibility through hybrid working, the council provides a range of benefits to reward and recognise contributions through a dedicated platform called VivUp, such as a cycle to work scheme. ●

VITAL STATISTICS

- 350,000 people
- 354,000 square miles
- 15,000 businesses
- 37 million visitors a year
- #1 zoo in Britain

'In terms of work-life balance, I feel there's been a step change since Covid. Although we had agile working previously it's now even more flexible and the significant investment we have made in the technology is making it happen. We can come in and have those face-to-face meetings and if one person can't get in the technology is there to have a hybrid meeting so they're included.'

Since Delyth became CEO she's brought a different style of leadership. She's very people-focused and it's real. With things like Colleague Connects you can see the thinking that's gone into it in terms of bringing people together now that we aren't all in the office anymore. Also, it's very much about "this is who I am – I'm allowed to be myself at work".

You can feel there's a genuine ambition to make the council and borough a better place. There's investment in colleagues with specialisms and that supports you to do a good job. Little things like the fact you'll find the leader or CEO in the kitchen making a cup of tea and chatting to everyone says a lot about the kind of place it is to work. ●

Morgan Jones
Strategy and innovation manager



Cheshire West and Chester is a borough of contrasts with a wide variety of regeneration projects under way or in the pipeline

Guiding the borough's growth

When you're home to a Roman walled city, one of Europe's largest oil refineries, a low-carbon 'superplace' and 200 square miles of countryside, guiding growth and delivering regeneration are a tricky business. But with diversity comes an abundance of opportunities that are further enhanced by the fact the borough sits beneath two major city regions in the shape of Liverpool and Greater Manchester.

The council's approach focuses on tailoring plans around themes that reflect the strengths – and needs – of each place while playing a prominent role in regional and sub-national partnerships to ensure the borough plays its part in the north's

economic revival. For example, leader Cllr Louise Gittins is vice chair of Transport for the North, which is building the case for investment in strategic transport improvements across the north of England.

'A big part of our role is partnership working and collaboration, to bring in that inward investment,' explains chief executive Delyth Curtis. 'That's the shift for council leaders across the board – it's the time you have to devote to this kind of work.'

One common thread is the way a number of regeneration plans utilise the power of markets to draw people together and act as an incubator for new businesses.



Chester

An overriding vision, One City Plan, provides a blueprint for how the public, private and community sectors will work together to make Chester fairer, stronger and greener by 2045.

A number of major schemes are set to turn this vision into reality. They include Chester City Gateway, which will transform a key strategic site around the train station and realise the area's untapped potential.

Chester Northgate has already breathed new life into this historic city by creating a new leisure and retail destination through the development of open streets, a new market and square.

The council's investment in arts and culture continues via the

Storyhouse development, a theatre and public library with a cinema that is set to open as part of the Northgate development in the autumn.



Ellesmere Port

Ellesmere Port is the industrial beating heart of the borough but its future is very much focused around the green economy. The town is one of the UK's first 'superplaces' that will support the 'green industrial revolution' through the development of Origin, a clean industry and green energy cluster. The council has secured £13.4m from the Levelling Up Fund to regenerate the town centre by overhauling the market hall, improving walking and cycling routes and bringing forward sites for new homes.



Northwich

This historic town was the birthplace of the chemical giant, ICI, whose legacy is giving way to new opportunities and a number of projects are helping to regenerate Northwich and fulfil its potential.

They include the renovation of Northwich Library and proposals to bring forward modern and affordable town centre living on a key site are being explored. The council also has multi-million pound plans for the Winnington Bridge Corridor in order to alleviate congestion, improve the environment cyclists and pedestrians and support the town's future growth.



Winsford

The regeneration of Winsford town centre is under way via a council-led scheme that fulfils a promise to the people of the town when the local authority acquired the shopping centre in 2018. The project will create open public spaces alongside a number of new business premises, rejuvenating the tired 1960s development into a place where people will want to come and spend time.

The end result will be more relaxing environment with ample green space linked to a thriving waterfront area along with a wider variety of shops, cafés and leisure facilities.

Investment has also gone into Winsford Gateway, a major industrial estate close to the M6, that has released 30 hectares of employment land to enable existing businesses to grow and others to relocate. ●

Responding to an emergency

The council is fostering borough-wide action on climate change

Since declaring a climate emergency in 2019, the council has proven to be highly effective in leading the borough's response and driving towards net zero.

From cutting its carbon emissions by almost two-thirds to planting more than 124,000 trees, it has led by example.

The region has secured £72m of Government funding to enable the borough to be the centre of what aims to be the world's first net zero industrial cluster.

The council's efforts to cut energy use in its buildings, streetlights and schools secured it the Local Authority Body of the Year Award at this year's North West Regional



Energy Efficiency Awards.

But the clearest measure of success is in the way the council has engaged and mobilised partners to play their part. For example, working with housing associations

to retrofit homes and establishing a £7.5m climate emergency fund for carbon reduction projects.

It has encouraged residents, community groups, schools and businesses to share how they are helping to protect the environment, providing an online platform to inspire others.

The council's work since declaring a climate emergency was highlighted by the LGA peer review team: 'The response to this has been impressive with the council confidently stepping forward, working with others to start to see this realised across the borough. This is one of the areas of practice where many others in the sector could learn from the approach taken here.'