

## Tameside The Place

Tameside, a small metropolitan borough in Greater Manchester, comprises of nine towns and has a population of 231,071 people across 99,527 households. The borough has a [diverse demographic](#) and, between 2011 and 2021, has had a population growth of 5.4%, including increases in the elderly and youth populations, and a 1% increase in single parent households. [This demographic shift](#), coupled with a decline in the economically active population and the shift away from funding authorities on the basis of need, has intensified financial pressures on public services. Tameside has significant socio-economic challenges, being the 28th most deprived out of 317 local authorities in England, with 17.4% of children under 16 living in absolute low-income families. Tameside is a [high employment but low wage and low skill economy](#) with the largest employment sector in the borough being retail. There are significant health inequalities across the borough, stemming from socio-economic disadvantage, with those in the most deprived areas living nearly ten years or less than those in the least deprived.

## Our Recent Past

Over the last 15 years, there have been a number of key events that have shaped the borough. In 1999 Ashton Pioneer Housing (APH) was the start of the first real large-scale voluntary stock transfer organisation as [301 council homes were transferred](#). Tameside Sports Trust ([Active Tameside](#)) was [formed](#) and the borough's first PFI (Private Finance Initiative) schools- Alder High School and 2 primaries - opened.. In 2000 the [New Charter Housing Trust Group were formed to take the stock transfer from TMBC](#) and deliver a ten year programme of investment and improvement amounting to £224million. Through the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Programme in 2008, the Local Education Partnership (LEP) was formed, and [£200 million of BSF funding was secured for the building of new schools](#) in Tameside.

In 2011 the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) was established and Tameside became one of its ten members. [The first Greater Manchester Devolution Deal was formed in 2014, and then subsequently revised in 2015, 2016, 2017](#) until the 7<sup>th</sup> and most recent devolution deal was reached in 2023. In 2013, the Metrolink came to Ashton, further connecting the borough to both the city centre, and other GM boroughs. Also, in July 2013 the Tameside NHS Trust was placed into special measures by the NHS Medical Director Sir Bruce Keogh. It was taken out of special measures two years later in 2015 and in 2017 the rating was recorded as 'Good'. Also in 2015 the [Care Together Programme](#) was set up, with a clear programme plan and governance structure which connected key partners. In the same year the Greater Manchester Pension Fund (GMPF), which is administered by Tameside Council, was awarded the LGPS Fund of the Decade. In 2022 GMPF also won the UK Pension Fund of the Year. It is the largest LGPS fund in the UK and there is a separate report on its achievements regarding being low cost and high performing.

In 2016 the [Strategic Commissioning Board](#) was established and Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (TMBC) won the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) council of the Year. 2019 saw the opening of Tameside One as a joint service centre, including the library, council offices, customer services, welfare rights, Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), and Cashbox Credit Union, amongst others making their home there.

In 2022, [Stalybridge was the Greater Manchester Town of Culture](#). Also in June 2022 the Local Government Boundary Commission for England made the Tameside (Electoral Changes) Order 2022, which officially abolished the existing 19 wards and created 19 new wards with different boundaries. Because of this change, all 57 seats on the council, three per ward, were contested. Politically, Labour is the controlling group and has been in power since 1979.

## Financial Context

Between 2010 and 2020 Tameside needed to make savings of more than £163million (roughly £700 per household), and a further £24million of savings between 2020 and 2023. This means that from

2010 to now there has been a 24% reduction in Tameside's real terms spending power. However, we are still the largest spending public body in the area, at nearly half a billion pounds a year.

The Council recognised in 2022 that its use of reserves to support the revenue financial position (mainly childrens) had become unsustainable as we had reached a level where we cannot be depleted any further, and acted to turn the position around, instituting a new [Medium Term Financial Strategy \(MTFS\)](#). The revised MTFS shows a cumulative budget gap of £44.243m. Further inflation and social care demand pressures meant that the 2023/24 budget setting process needed to address an opening budget gap of £38 million. As well as the £20m savings and the Council Tax increase, a balanced budget is predicated on an increase in forecast business rates income of £7 million.

## **Service Transformation**

Tameside Council is committed to delivering service improvements through a series of key projects and transformation programmes with a focus on delivering savings to meet the financial targets in line with the Council's MTFS. The key principle underpinning our transformation work is that efficiencies, cost avoidances, and reduced demand can all be driven by improving outcomes for service users.

All our transformation and improvement works are driven by the Council's Corporate Plan and supported by its associated reporting framework. This is a structure of strategies and performance reports reaching from each member of staff's monthly "My Performance" supervision meetings; through each service's business plan and performance monitoring; up to the Council's overarching performance reporting, strategic projects, and Corporate Plan. This framework is outlined in a diagram visible on the Council's website here: [Strategic-Delivery-and-Performance-Framework](#).

The Transformation function has worked across the Authority since it was established in early 2022 to deliver meaningful improvements, including supporting the Council's Early Help function to meet their ambition to provide support as early as possible, reducing the demand for statutory services.

The Council has three improvement /transformation boards for children's SEND and Adults.

The surge in the number of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) required a fundamental rethink to how services are delivered. The SEND Local Area Partnership Board and associated infrastructure of sub-groups was established to oversee the transformational work required to deliver better outcomes alongside savings, including a substantial review of the processes and systems in business support for the Council's SEND team. The Transformation Team worked in partnership with the SEND Team to deliver improvements; modernise and streamline systems to increase team capacity, including launching a dedicated SEND Portal; and rationalising data into a case management system to increase managerial oversight. This resulted in a measured improvement in the Service's KPI for initial Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) completed within 20 weeks, rising from 32% in December 2021 to 60.3%, above the national average, in April 2023.

Linked to this, work to review and update the Council's Staying Put Policy was able to support more young people to remain in their foster care placements post-18 by increasing the financial package offered to Staying Put carers while reducing the Council's financial contribution to the project by offsetting costs. By setting a new formal agreement to be made between carers and young adults, the young person can claim any benefits to which they may be entitled, which can offset the housing costs portion of the carer's financial support package.

In addition to the significant progress that has already been made to transform our services and the way they are delivered to residents, the Council is currently pursuing a number of strategic transformation projects across the range of the Council's business. Work is taking place in both adult and children's social care to reduce service pressure with better early intervention. Adult social care is conducting a programme of work to improve the reablement and occupational therapy approach to support people to live well without needing a social care provision, and children's social

care is working to implement the family drug and alcohol court model into their offer as an alternative to care proceedings.

Outside of social care, significant regeneration and development schemes are taking place in several of the borough's town centres, accompanied by transformation programmes focussed on modernising the Council's car parking offer, with a comprehensive parking strategy summary report published in October last year, with elements including investing in necessary equipment to accept card and contactless payments and rebasing parking tariffs to increase service income while remaining competitive. The Council is also conducting reviews into the operating models for both our highways and waste services.

Looking into the future, the Council continues to seek to improve its services in a way that delivers better outcomes and supports financial sustainability. The transformation programmes planned for the near future include:

- A whole-organisation exercise to review spend on prevention and demand management efforts with an aim to increase efficacy of spend;
- Review the Council's approach to customer contact to improve efficiency and ensure that mechanisms for communication allow the Council to quickly and effectively assess and respond to need as early as possible to avoid escalation;
- Developing a transformative avoidable demand programme around SEND to mitigate volumes and unit costs of EHCPs while reducing levels of avoidable escalation into social care
- Review and improve practice around the transition into adulthood involving children's and adults' social care, education, and housing services, targeting identifying children earlier and ensuring that they enter adulthood with appropriate packages of care.

### **Taking Advantage of Technology**

At present, some of the legacy IT systems are proving a barrier to the enhanced services the Council wants to offer residents. We need systems that can integrate effectively and are flexible enough to enable a more agile workforce that, for example, visits people in their homes, and are not a drain on resources as we resort to expensive maintenance and integration. Additionally, we need our resident's experience of using our systems to be more engaging and intuitive.

We have therefore embarked on a root and branch review of our infrastructure. We have recently upgraded our Microsoft 365 licensing— this will provide security and compliance features, Power BI and MS Teams Telephony. To maximise the license investment, there are plans to procure additional specialist support to ensure the remainder of these features are configured and deployed using a 'Secure by Design' approach, which will be important before enabling the AI 'Copilot' features to further enhance service delivery.

The Council is also planning to make use of low code/\_no code technology available via Microsoft Power Platform, which will provide the tools to support the organisation in automating processes and workflows and provide the opportunity to replace some legacy systems. The power platform consists of Power Apps, Power Pages, Power Virtual Agents, Power Automate (which includes RPA capability) and Power BI.

The data platform project will provide the foundations which will ultimately lead the organisation to a place where predictive analysis can become the norm, providing greater and faster insight into how our services are performing.

We recognise the ongoing need to improve the quality of the data we collect and make it available to residents. At present, data must be collated manually, manipulated and then presented via legacy dashboard tools, which is labour intensive. There are plans to implement a data lake capability within

our Microsoft Azure tenant which will provide Tameside Council with the platform to set up data pipelines from relevant systems which can then be analysed and visualised in Power BI reports. The initial phase of the implementation will be focusing on Children's and Adult's social care data.

### **Reducing Wasteful Spend**

The Council has already made significant reductions to its spending over the past several years, but is continuing to seek efficiencies wherever possible, including by working to delete vacant roles where appropriate and by investing to save as a key part of our transformation programme.

The Council has a spend moratorium in place with greater oversight of any payment orders raised to ensure that any spend the Council makes is truly necessary, and we recently revised our process for budget monitoring and reporting to better identify areas of overspend.

Like many local authorities, Tameside incurs significant costs through our reliance on expensive agency social workers; these workers are also more transient than permanent staff, which can result in the delivery of lower quality care, as the Council is unable to embed best practice and its corporate culture into the workforce long-term, and service users are unable to develop longstanding and trusting relationships with their social workers. To combat this, both in response to financial pressures and feedback from our recent Ofsted inspection, the Council is working to develop a social worker academy model in our children's social care system to develop a permanent workforce of permanent social workers, reducing its agency costs while also improving the quality of the service.

The Council does not make any unnecessary investment into Equalities, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work, with these vital functions sitting alongside other required corporate and executive functions. The Council recognises the significant benefit brought to the borough through our efforts to ensure that services are accessible to, and that decisions are made in the interest of, everyone across Tameside's broad range of diverse communities. This work also ensures that the Council upholds its statutory duty to advance equality under Section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010.

### **Barriers to Progress**

Despite the progress we have made on our transformation journey, there are still a number of nationally controlled obstacles that hinder progress both strategically and operationally. As reported in the introduction we have seen a 24% reduction in our spending power since 2010 – the absence of a sustainable funding model through increased real-terms grant funding and multi-year settlements means that we are on the back-foot when faced with the inflationary pressures we have seen in recent years. Similarly, Council Tax reform that creates a fairer and more equitable way to fund local services that does not disadvantage the most deprived households is overdue.

The ubiquity of single-year grant funding across services through a bidding process has a significant impact not only on our ability to plan ahead and commission effectively but also diverts officer capacity and resource.

We also call for Government to reverse the 2024/25 cut to the Services Grant for local government, and ideally increase by inflation, to reflect the financial pressures local authorities are facing at this time.

Levels of deprivation in places like Tameside combined with increases in the cost of living have accelerated already high demand for services and in social care this is felt particularly acutely and this outstrips our council tax base despite maximising annual increases.. Social care funding needs to be reformed and based on need in a local authority area and not based on residents' ability to pay the social care precept. A commitment to extending the Household Support Fund would also help ease pressure on the most vulnerable.

Within children's social care, the largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits and charging materially higher prices than would be expected from a functioning market.

Some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, which creates a risk that disorderly failure of highly leveraged firms could disrupt placements. Regulation of the market to prevent excessive profiteering is required.

Recruitment and retention of staff in key areas, particularly the loss of permanent employees in statutory services to agencies that pay higher rates (which we are then, in turn, forced to use to shore up gaps), adds an unnecessary cost to stretched services. The digital skills gap is another national workforce issue that needs addressing, particularly in areas like cyber-security.

The loss of the housing benefit subsidy and increasing homelessness and temporary accommodation costs have taken a heavy toll on Local Authority funding, not to mention the impact on residents' lives.

Tameside is currently one of the fourteen local authorities delivering the Start for Life services funded by the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme. It is imperative that this funding is made permanent to provide support and stability to our most vulnerable families.

Finally, despite progress being made locally and regionally on transport we are still lacking a cohesive national transport plan that provides a level playing field across the country to enable people living in urban areas like Tameside to access jobs as easily as equivalent places in London.

### **Some Urgent Changes Required to Reduce the Risk of s.114 Notices Being Issued**

As highlighted above in the current climate, like many Authorities up and down the country, Tameside is spending as if there were a section 114 notice and the following proposals would seek to mitigating the current financial risks:

- Reduce competitive bidding and roll grants into the Finance Settlement and grant certainty with multi-year settlements
- Review care markets in Adults and Children's Social Care to limit profiteering and increase the volume of placements
- Review funding and duties for young people with SEND, specifically the 2014 guidance, which has resulted in unsustainable levels EHCP applications alongside forgiving accumulated DSG deficits
- Ending 'no fault' evictions and allowing Councils to claim full Housing Benefit for Temporary Accommodation
- More funding for road maintenance, including pothole repairs