

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Refresh

North Devon Council

23 September – 8 October 2021

Feedback report



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1. Background

North Devon Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in February 2020 (the full report is attached at Appendix A). At the conclusion of the process, as is normal practice, a full written report was produced and agreed informally with the council. However, events overtook the process and before the report could be published and adopted formally by the council, a national lockdown was declared, and the council reorientated to support their communities through the national Covid pandemic.

As testament to the council's commitment to both their own improvement agenda and the wider principles of Sector Led Improvement, officers and members of North Devon Council wanted to ensure the original CPC report was published for the benefit of their staff, and also the wider community, many of whom engaged positively with the CPC process. Whilst much of the report remains relevant and pertinent, the intervening 18 months have seen unprecedented levels of change locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

Working with the council, we agreed to undertake a short 'refresh' exercise – providing an opportunity to revisit the recommendations contained in the original report, consider progress made against those recommendations and comment on issues for continuing improvement. This report summarises our findings, and it is very much intended to be considered alongside the original report.

The small team assembled to undertake this work was led by Stephen Baker, Chief Executive of East Suffolk Council and Lead Peer on the original CPC in 2020 – this ensured continuity across the process. Cherry Bennett, Director of People & Policy at Bath & North East Somerset Council also joined the team to provide a fresh perspective on the organisational development elements identified during the CPC process last year.

2. Summary of the peer challenge approach

2.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge refresh and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise and to provide continuity following the previously held corporate peer challenge. The peers were:

- Stephen Baker, Chief Executive East Suffolk Council
- Cherry Bennett, Director of People and Policy Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Emily McGuinness, Peer Challenge Manager LGA
- Kathryn Trant, Regional Adviser LGA

Councillor Anita Lower, who was part of the original Corporate Peer Challenge team, sadly passed away earlier this year.

2.2. Scope and focus

The CPC refresh was conducted using a mixture of virtual individual interviews and 'in person' group workshops, with a feedback presentation made to senior officers and members. This report provides more detailed feedback as summarised in that presentation. We met with all members (apart from one who was on leave) of the newly appointed Senior Management Team, the Leader of the council as well as a cross section of middle managers and frontline staff and as a result, feel we have a sound evidence base for our presentation and this subsequent report.

Looking at the suite of recommendations contained in the original report, we used this refresh process to focus on three themes:

1. **Theme 1** – Organisational Capacity and Leadership
2. **Theme 2** -Strategic and Financial Planning
3. **Theme 3** -Partnership Working

This report is structured around these themes and identifies areas of positive

progress as well as suggestions for continued improvement, and to reinforce a point made earlier, this report supplements the narrative and recommendations of the initial, more detailed CPC report.

3. Feedback

3.1. Theme 1 – Organisational Leadership and Capacity

Like many others in the sector, North Devon Council has responded well in supporting their communities through the COVID pandemic over the past 18 months. We heard expression of a real sense of pride from all those we spoke with, as they reflected on how the council has worked together in the face of adversity to serve their community and to support one another.

Reviewing strategic management capacity was a key recommendation of the original CPC report and a part of this refresh, and the team were impressed that, alongside delivering an effective pandemic response, the council has managed to undertake an expansive recruitment process and implement a new senior management structure. A new, gender balanced, senior management team has been successfully recruited against a set of organisational values and behaviours – these have been developed by staff and whilst there is still more to do to embed them in processes at all levels of the organisation, it was encouraging to hear senior and middle managers articulate the values and behaviours with fluency and confidence.

Staff have valued the collaborative approach by which the values and behaviours have been developed and using the Organisational Development Group to maintain momentum and ensure all levels of the organisation share this sense of inclusion will be important moving forward – from the staff we met, those in ‘middle management’ were more conversant with the values and behaviours than those we spoke with in the front line staff workshop.

Although still very early days (some of the Heads of Service had only been in post a matter of weeks when we met them), there is clearly clarity of purpose and intent across the new SMT. Staff welcomed a more gender balanced SMT and the fact that all successful applicants are internal appointments is inspiring for the workforce. Whilst it is a tribute to the loyalty North Devon Council inspires in its staff and a well-earned reward for investing in your people, it is important that a comprehensive and

longer term support and development package (e.g. coaching and mentoring from within the sector) is put in place to support these new organisational leaders as they transition to form the new SMT. Ensuring they have a safe space to develop and reflect will maintain the confidence and goodwill of staff.

Now that the SMT are all in post, it's vital that the next phase of the review is implemented and that appropriate 'back filling' arrangements are designed and addressed through the planned service reviews.

Currently, the new Heads of Service are still carrying some legacy workloads, as are others in the next tier of management, and whilst it is recognised this is inevitable at this stage of the review, clarity (and action) around plans to address this will help reassure the wider workforce and ensure the benefits of the successful senior management restructure are felt across the organisation.

The credibility of, and confidence people have in, the Chief Executive, has been significant in securing the delivery of a successful senior management restructure – we heard his open and inclusive approach to this period of significant change described as a 'breath of fresh air'. The new structures address concerns raised in the earlier CPC report around the linear line management responsibilities allocated to the Chief Executive and in order to capitalise on this, it's vital that senior leadership team 'thinking space' is protected moving forward. This is always a challenging task, especially when the council is facing continued unprecedented demand but is essential if the council is to maximise this opportunity to enhance their strategic capacity.

The creation of a Programme Management Office headed by a valued and respected new member of SMT is a positive step and welcomed across the organisation. For this structural change to deliver maximum benefit, it is important that work to establish clear organisational priorities – against a narrative in the post pandemic era that doing everything is simply not a feasible option – continues at pace. Establishing political ownership of priority, and non-priority, activities and projects will be a challenging, but vital next step in ensuring the best use of council resources in the interests of the community it serves. Engaging members in the well-regarded 'One Team' approach will help with this and build on the collaborative culture of the organisation so clearly demonstrated by staff.

Whilst the 'One Team' approach was spoken about positively in the staff workshops, reference was made to some residual concerns that work needs to continue with the manual /depot based workforce to ensure they feel part of the whole organisation – we heard encouraging examples from the Head of Service about spending time in the canteen and building trust based relationships – it's important that the rest of the organisation continues to follow this lead – and that the values and behaviours framework is applied consistently and constructively in all service areas to maintain credibility.

The move to home working necessitated by COVID has accelerated changes to working practices and following some early significant investment and 'fine tuning' has now been embraced by the majority of staff, resulting in a much more agile and digitally enabled workforce. However, returning to the office is a cause of concern for some staff, as is the case in many councils across the country, and will need to be handled carefully. We heard that staff briefings were planned and we strongly encourage you to keep up a regular programme of in person and virtual staff engagement sessions, for all staff including the operational workforce. This will help to support your transition to hybrid working.

We saw so many green shoots of optimism across the organisation with the majority of our original recommendations in respect of organisational leadership and capacity progressed with impressive impetus and success. Putting time and energy into nurturing this early progress will provide an enviable springboard for future improvement.

3.2. Theme 2 – Strategic and Financial Planning

Our original report recommended that plans to deliver commercialisation and the required culture change be accelerated and, even in the challenging context of the past 18 months, it's clear to see that the council is delivering on its commercialisation agenda.

We heard outline details of a number of significant commercial investment decisions that are almost at the point of completion, and whilst these involve an element of risk, the council is clear that these commercial investments form part of a wider place shaping agenda and demonstrate officer and member commitment to taking bold decisions.

Successful bids to external funding streams such as Future High Streets Fund are enabling the council to deliver on town centre regeneration plans and play an important role in post pandemic economic and social recovery.

It is encouraging to hear about plans to support members to take more visible ownership of reports through the committee process. This will help to establish stronger links between lead members and decision making committees, as well as support members to provide essential political leadership in setting clear organisational priorities.

The working relationship between Leader and SMT during the pandemic has been very good, with the Leader regularly attending SMT meetings. The Leader is clearly committed to plans for change and improvement. Given that we only spoke directly with the Leader– the extent to which the wider membership ‘own’ and drive the corporate plan and priorities remains unclear. An all member workshop in October was an important opportunity for members to be briefed on the post-pandemic operating context and the impact this has on the overall capacity of the organisation (both financial and bandwidth) to deliver on Corporate Plan priorities and projects, and there is more to do to embed these key messages as work continues on future iterations of the MTFS.

3.3. Theme 3 – Partnership Working

The council has engaged positively and productively in a number of local and regional partnerships as part of the pandemic response and we heard commitments to build on this moving forward, for example, Northern Devon (Health Based Partnership) has performed well over the past 18 months and good working relationships across the sector will pay dividends moving forward.

The Chief Executive has played an active role in bringing forward housing issues through ‘Team Devon’ – demonstrating a willingness and ability to act with a more externally focused perspective – the same can be said regarding the impact of Covid on local authority leisure provision. As a result, North Devon Council has an improved sub-regional, regional, and national profile, reinforced by the Leader playing an increasingly active role in county and sub-regional partnerships. The

council is now much better placed to maximise opportunities as they arise as part of wider 'Levelling Up' and devolution programmes.

Opportunities remain to further develop working partnerships with neighbouring councils, and whilst the appointment of a shared Climate Change Officer with Torridge District Council is a positive step, as is the approach to a joint refresh of the Local Plan, challenges remain. Addressing these will become increasingly important in the face of the spending challenges that will inevitably emerge in the post pandemic landscape.

4. Conclusions

- There are green shoots of optimism and the council is very clearly on the cusp of seeing improvement plans come to fruition, and the early indications we saw are very positive.
- Staff are fully behind all of the newly appointed Senior Management Team and we would encourage you to capitalise on this, communicate effectively across the council teams and be bold as you move forward.
- Issues of capacity need to be addressed as a priority to protect both the strategic thinking space the new structures were designed to deliver, and ensure workloads are manageable throughout the rest of the organisation.
- It is important to take members on your journey – and for all members to continue to step into their organisational leadership role. Building on conversations that have already started, clarity from elected members on priority, and non-priority areas is essential as plans are refreshed as part of the pandemic recovery process.
- Take the opportunity to build on your successful response to the pandemic and capitalise on your strong community leadership presence.
- Celebrate your successes! You have delivered on many of the ambitions/recommendations we noted when we were with you 18 months ago and have created a springboard for continuing to move forward – you have all the pieces in place including the trust and support of your workforce – it is now within your gift to capitalise on this opportunity, maintain focus and deliver on

the potential.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul Clarke is available to discuss any further support the council requires. paul.clarke@local.gov.uk.