

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

City of Doncaster Council

13th April 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 16th – 19th May 2022 and published the full report on 14th July 2022 and published an 11-point action plan in January 2023.

The progress review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately six months after the council published the CPC action plan, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank City of Doncaster Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at City of Doncaster Council took place on-site on 13th April 2023. The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge contained in the feedback report sent to the council on 17th June 2022.

For this six-month progress review, the following members of the original CPC team and LGA staff were involved:

- Chief Executive Peer – **Professor Steven Broomhead, MBE** - (Chief Executive at Warrington Borough Council)
- Lead Member Peer – **Councillor Shabir Pandor** - (Leader at Kirklees Council)
- LGA Principal Adviser – **Mark Edgell** – (Principal Adviser for East Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber and North East)
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – **Satvinder Rana** (Senior Regional Adviser)

The peer team met face to face over the course of 2.5 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- **Mayor Ros Jones** – Elected Mayor, City of Doncaster Council
- **Councillor Glyn Jones** - Deputy Mayor, City of Doncaster Council
- **Damian Allen** - Chief Executive, City of Doncaster Council
- **Debbie Hogg** - Director Corporate Resources, City of Doncaster Council
- **Lee Tillman** - Assistant Director Policy, Insight & Change, City of Doncaster Council
- **Sennette Wroot** - Senior Policy & Insight Manager, City of Doncaster Council

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The Peer Team was pleased to see the positive way in which the council addressed the recommendations of the Corporate Peer Challenge of 2022, the actions it has taken so far, and the evidence provided to show the progress being made.

The council's leadership briefed the peer team about the work it has been doing and the context within which it has been operating since the peer challenge in May 2022. The council has been working to a challenging agenda that has tested its leadership and organisational capacity. Soaring council costs & significant funding shortfalls; cost of living activities to support communities; delivering major projects (e.g. Levelling Up Fund, Town Deals); closure of Doncaster Sheffield Airport and preparation for its commercial acquisition or through a Compulsory Purchase Order; Children's and Adult's Social Care - including the successful transfer of all of the Doncaster Children's Services back into the council; summer heatwave; Queen's death; City Status & Royal visit co-ordination; aftermath of the pandemics, Ukraine refugees; and an historic child abuse case which has attracted national media attention have all impacted on the council's operations. It is now positioning itself to have a sharper focus on priorities through a functional realignment so that the changing and challenging context it is facing can be mainstreamed into its strategic planning and delivery. This includes strengthening the corporate centre of the organisation.

The council developed and published a 11-point action plan in response to the recommendations of the corporate peer challenge and has been delivering against this. The peer team was impressed with the progress made so far and would encourage the council to continue its delivery whilst ensuring that it is measuring the impacts of its efforts.

Recommendation 1

Pause and reflect on the council's strategies to address organisational overload and fatigue, and address capacity issues.

The council recognised the need for a strategic pause to help the organisation address the gap between ambition and capacity. However, it has been difficult to create the space to do this due to the unrelenting internal and external demands and pressures on the council. Nevertheless, progress has been made in several key areas to address organisational wellbeing and capacity issues. This includes the introduction of a hybrid working policy, the creation of collaborative and shared working spaces with partners in more localised settings, rationalising assets by developing more multi-use/occupancy spaces, introducing digital tools and equipment to reduce the use and cost of paper-based practices, introducing a suite of wellbeing initiatives and support for staff, working innovatively to recruit and retain hard to fill vacancies in, for example, Children's social care and through apprenticeships.

Going forward, the council is focused on rationalising high-cost physical assets, for example Mary Wollett Centre, as part of its wider estates programme, rolling out learning and 'Your Way of Working' practices to other sites, and continuing the programme of work to recruit hard to fill positions.

The peer team recognises the pressures on local authorities and the challenging context under which they are working and on Doncaster specifically as a result of its success in gaining city status. In view of all this the council has made significant progress and has put in place some key measures to enable it to alleviate organisational overload and fatigue. The peer team would encourage the council to continue keeping an eye on staff well-being and take periodic temperature checks through staff surveys and refreshed trade union engagement.

Recommendation 2

Condense the key priorities for the council for the next three years and set annual delivery targets.

The council has agreed a Doncaster Delivering Together Investment Plan (2022-23) and a digital product prototype to enable it to demonstrate the distribution of investment across the city by priority. It is now in the process of setting out its investment priorities for the year ahead in a refreshed plan to be published in April 2023. This will enable it to align its investment plan to the budgetary and policy delivery cycles.

The refresh of the council's service planning process for 2023-24 alongside a slimmed down corporate plan for the organisation has been completed. There is an ongoing focus on supporting Doncaster residents to tackle the cost-of-living crisis and supporting economic growth and investment. It has also refreshed parts of its performance management framework to ensure its governance arrangements are sound and that its equality, diversity and inclusion objectives are monitored as part of quarterly monitoring. In addition, year 2 of locality plans have been developed, a new Regenerative Economic Strategy (that was in development when the CPC took place) which was co-produced with the business community and Team Doncaster partners has been agreed and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy is in development.

The council is intending to bring forward its Regenerative Council programme to help deliver internal improvements, efficiencies and savings. This means reflecting on the shape of the organisation to ensure that it is fit for purpose to deliver its ambitions; reviewing recruitment and retention and focusing on succession planning, apprenticeships and hard to fill posts; and piloting neighbourhood working in Edlington, with a view to expanding to other areas.

These are positive steps that the council is taking to update and bring greater clarity to its strategic agenda. There are a lot of exciting things happening in Doncaster and the peer team would encourage the council to continue ensuring that its strategic agenda remains aligned and is easy to understand and digest by its key stakeholders.

Recommendation 3

Simplify and communicate key messages in a more tailored manner, particularly internally.

The council delivered a staff engagement programme in autumn 2022 to communicate and share the action plan and used this engagement to set out a new set of values for the organisation that are owned and recognised by staff. The revised organisational values are supported by employee centric toolkits to ensure they translate into the way people work and behave. The values and toolkits will be rolled out through the Personal Development and Review (PDR) process and an ongoing reward and recognition scheme put in place.

The council has a strong and clear set of organisational values. These will help to provide the framework for the way staff deliver services and in how they behave. It will be important to ensure that these continue to be embedded within the organisation through internal processes and that the senior leadership team continues to model these values in their day to day working behaviours.

Recommendation 4

Continue to plan for the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on local communities and the delivery of council services.

The council has set up a Well-Being Essentials Group made up of key partners to co-ordinate activity across key elements including debt and finance, housing, food, digital inclusion, employment, and skills. It has also bolstered the Household Support Fund with an extra £4m to continue to deliver support to those people that need it the most, including the provision of free school means during the Easter holidays. Accessible and co-ordinated advice and information through a winter booklet was sent out to residents and businesses to help respond to the cost-of-living crisis. The council is using data to drive its thinking behind the support to ensure that it is targeted in the right places.

The council is working with and supporting established anchor organisations in local areas and has set up a Fairness and Well-Being Commission (F&WBC), with an independent chair, to look at the key ways the city can become a fairer place in the

future. The Commission has begun meeting and taking evidence. The Commission will then produce a report that will identify and recommend key areas for improvement which can then be addressed by the council and its partners. These recommendations will inform the Health and Well-Being Strategy. In addition, the council has introduced a new protected characteristic around ‘*care experience*’ which is based on the lived experience of its young people who have been through the care system. This is to ensure they are afforded equality of opportunity to build positive lives as they step into adulthood.

The peer team was impressed with these interventions which could be ground-breaking in their approach to tackling some of the big challenges facing local authorities. It will be critical however, that real impact is made on the quality of life of local people who need support the most. This will mean continuing to monitor, measure and demonstrate outcomes and its inclusive impact on individuals and communities.

Recommendation 5

Reassess the council’s corporate risk appetite.

The council is reviewing its risk appetite through active examples and taking a ‘learning by doing’ approach to support greater investment in the area. It has a Medium-Term Financial Plan in place and has also developed the Doncaster Delivering Together Investment Plan (2022-23) which outlines the investments it will be making into key regeneration projects and the role it will play in attracting external funding and investments. It is currently negotiating the future of the Doncaster Sheffield Airport through a potentially ambitious commercial acquisition or Compulsory Purchase Order. In addition, work is now complete on the £6m Askern Leisure Centre which involved transforming the country’s last coal-fired leisure centre into a multi-purpose wellbeing centre that will be integrated with a country park and powered by green energy.

To ensure that investment decisions have the appropriate safeguards and governance arrangements in place, the council is placing the Mayor and Chief Executive as the strategic leads for all large-scale investments. It is also reviewing its risk policy to ensure that risk appetite is clearly built in so that it can be tracked and

managed, together with strong corporate governance.

The council's ambitions for the local area and its economy are clear and it appears to be taking a progressive and evidence-based approach to investments and risk. Its plans for the Doncaster Sheffield Airport are ambitious and with a high degree of risk attached and the potential for it to be distraction from delivering the council's other priorities, but the council appears to be alive to these risks and supported by appropriately skilled and experienced advisors.

The peer team would encourage the council to continually review the opportunity cost of its endeavours, ensure that it maintains robust governance arrangements and puts in place all the necessary safeguards as it pursues these high-cost and high-profile projects.

Recommendation 6

Celebrate the council's achievements and consider sharing learning and good practice with the wider local government sector.

City of Doncaster Council has a good story to tell, and it has some great innovations to share within the local government sector. It has already shared some of its experiences in the August 2022 edition of the Municipal Journal, as well as via local media, for example, it has been profiling its award-winning Apprenticeships programme, Veterans Gold Award, award winning Health and Wellbeing initiatives for the workforce, the annual Team Doncaster summit showcases partnership work to a local audience, and research and collaboration with universities. In addition, the Chief Executive showcased some of the council's initiatives at a Royal Society of Arts (RSA) event and the council shared its recent experiences in the Municipal Journal (August 2022 edition). It is now discussing how it can work with the RSA on some of its regenerative approaches. The council has also received national recognition for its approach to the future of the Doncaster Sheffield Airport. Going forward, the peer team was informed that the council will be promoting Doncaster in the Municipal Journal supplement in Autumn 2023 and is strategically planning for further awards entries, including possible Council of the Year in 2025.

The peer team was pleased to see the positive profile Doncaster is beginning to get

locally, regionally and nationally and look forward to learning about and celebrating its achievements and successes in the future.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank City of Doncaster Council for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for East Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber and North-East, is the main contact between City of Doncaster Council and the Local Government Association. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires. His contact details are Email: mark.edgell@local.gov.uk Tel: 07747 636 910.



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(On behalf of the peer team)