

Stafford Borough Council

17 November 2021

Feedback report - Peer Challenge follow up visit



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1. Executive summary

Stafford Borough Council had their first corporate peer challenge (CPC) in July 2018. The timing of the CPC coincided with the bedding in of the council's new Business Plan which set out key objectives on growth, wellbeing and financial sustainability. The team heard a range of positive feedback about the council and the commitment of staff and councillors to Stafford as a place to live and work. There was a consistent message about the role of the Council as a proactive and supportive partner and it was clear that the organisation had strong processes in place to control its finances. The peer team felt that the simplified business plan, launched in 2018, provided an opportunity for the council to accelerate its pace to deliver changes necessary to support the ambition it demonstrated through its vision.

The peer challenge report from July 2018 made a number of recommendations, which were grouped into three themes: communication, organisation and change. The peer team had recognised the Council's ambition set out in its business plan and felt that it could do even more to promote, celebrate and communicate its positive achievements. To this end there were recommendations about undertaking an LGA communications review and developing a communications strategy, linked to the corporate business plan.

The July 2018 report noted that the Council's leadership team had taken progressive steps towards developing a long-term forward plan that set out Cabinet priorities with milestones and timelines. Recommendations were made to finalise and publish an effective and measurable forward plan to ensure appropriate accountability. Several times throughout the 2018 report reference was made to the Council's level of ambition, in particular to economic growth. The council has a clear understanding of place and is maximising the opportunities brought by its geographical position and the importance of balancing a sense of place, protecting the quality of life whilst at the same time, unlocking the potential that the Borough has to offer. An example of this was particularly evident in the pragmatic approach taken by the Council in relation to HS2 and the recognition of the opportunities and investments that this will bring to Stafford. This was echoed in the recommendations which asked the Council to review their risk appetite in order to make potentially difficult decisions now, in order to transform and facilitate the delivery of their ambitious objectives. To help fulfil these ambitions, the Council were also urged to utilise the talent and skills of staff and Members at all levels of the organisation. This included training for Members on specific skills such as scrutiny and implementing an organisational development programme that would help align the skills of the workforce to the delivery of corporate priorities. It was recommended that financial resources be identified to support any programme of change. Finally, the 2018 CPC recognised the Council's strength as a partner and emphasised the need to capitalise on the goodwill and capacity of partners to deliver plans.



The follow-up peer challenge in November 2021 observed a council that had made significant progress, despite the huge challenges and difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. The team were particularly impressed by how the council had dealt with this and how they had managed to continue to maximise their geographical position in order to sustain the level of ambition for economic growth/regeneration and housing delivery. It was noted that the challenges facing the council now were related to financial sustainability and organisational matters including the relationship with Cannock Chase Council, as they embarked on a shared chief executive arrangement, as well as recovering from the impact of the pandemic. Like many organisations, Stafford has utilised the skills and talents of its staff to deliver services differently during the pandemic and now has an opportunity to invest in those with greatest potential to ensure they are retained and developed at the council. The Council continues to have ambitious transformation plans and to achieve those, the strategic capacity of the senior leadership team should be urgently reviewed. The challenges facing local government during the course of the pandemic should not be underestimated, and Stafford's resilience has been demonstrated through its continued economic growth agenda, the commitment of its staff and leadership as well as its position as an influential partner in the region and beyond.

2. Feedback

The feedback below has been grouped into the same three categories as the recommendations in the original report: communication, organisation and change. An additional category 'capacity' has been added. A summary of the peer challenge process, as well as the recommendations from the initial review can be found at Annex A.

Communication

The original peer challenge recommended that the Council develop a communications strategy to celebrate and communicate the vision set out in the Business Plan, with a further recommendation that an LGA Communications review be commissioned to support this. The communications review had been scheduled for June 2020, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic the LGA made the decision to postpone. During the discussions between the peer team and the Council at the follow-up review, it was recognised that it was timely to revisit discussions internally about the next steps for a communications review.



An observation of the first Peer Challenge was that there was a clarity of narrative about the vision and ambition for economic growth within the Borough. Economic growth has remained an important part of Stafford's story and despite the pandemic the Council have continued to maximise the opportunities brought by their geographical position to progress on major regeneration projects such as Meecebook, Stafford Station Gateway and the wider town centre regeneration programme and deliver housing growth consistently above target. The Peer Team noted that this was particularly impressive given the challenging circumstances of the last 18 months. Examples that demonstrate Stafford's ability to drive forward development, even during the pandemic, include the opening of the newly refurbished Victoria Park and Holmcroft Park, Stafford Western Access Route (now known as 'Unicorn Way') and the demolition of the magistrate's court as part of a regeneration scheme. Economic growth and recovery remain a priority for the Council, as recognised in its commitment to the Stafford Growth, Regeneration and Infrastructure Partnership (SGRIP). This is further demonstrated through joint meetings held with Staffordshire County Council that include the Leaders and Senior Officers of both councils.

It had been noted during the first visit that the Council can point to a number of achievements and examples of community work with positive social impact, however, these were less visible within corporate communications. The Peer Team recommended that the Council should seek to proactively communicate the positive work it is undertaking for its community, alongside its growth achievements. An example of where progress had been made in this area was the introduction of community question and answer sessions to dispel myths about the Council's role in tackling climate change. The Council should continue to host opportunities to interact with its communities to clarify the role of the council in local matters and publicise its numerable successes. Since the follow-up review has taken place, the Council's annual community awards have been featured in local publication 'The Staffordshire Newsletter'. The Council has also had at least 8 front page articles that included features on the Community HUB, the new Local nature Reserve, Future High Streets Fund, Westbridge Park and press releases have been increased by 40%. The continued use of positive publicity to raise the profile of the Council's role is encouraged. The Peer Team felt that it was timely to undertake a communications review to ensure that the Council has a strategic approach to positively promoting more of what it is doing for its community. They emphasised that this would involve further recognising that communications is a strategic responsibility of the whole Council leadership and not just a function of the communications department. The Council should not be afraid to be confident and bold in telling its positive stories.



Progress had been made in a number of areas, and in particular the Peer Team commented on the positive #oneteam project that had evolved internally to celebrate staff and successful projects. It was clear that the communications manager had worked closely with representatives across the organisation to improve internal communications. Furthermore, it was noted that since the first Peer Challenge, a communications plan for every major event or project had been created – the Peer Team encouraged the Council to take this one step further by capitalising on successful stories both internally and externally to raise the profile of the council's achievements.

The peer team praised the work of the internal communications team and, in particular, the creation of a network of communication champions across the organisation, coordinated by the Communications Manager. However, the peer team also recognised that promotion of successful projects was a responsibility of the Council corporately and not just the small communications team. Upon reviewing the Council's social media, the Peer Team felt that it was often reactive in nature. However, the Council have demonstrated that their press releases are distributed through Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor and LinkedIn. Consideration should be given to using social media to more proactively celebrate the Council's successes. There is no doubt that the Council demonstrate influence over the local agenda in Staffordshire and beyond, for example through the Leader's membership on the Local Enterprise Partnership Board. However, the Peer Team reiterated that more could be done to communicate the Council's ambition and success to its communities through social media and other relevant channels.

Organisation

When the Peer Team first visited in 2018, Stafford Borough Council had recently adopted a new Corporate Business Plan, which set out how the Council would deliver across three clear objectives: growth, wellbeing and financial sustainability. A recommendation was made to publish an 'effective and measurable forward plan, setting out Cabinet priorities alongside timescales and milestones'. Significant progress has been made against this recommendation, with the introduction of a 'business flow document' in August 2018, shortly after the Peer Challenge. The document ensures that the Council's Leadership Team are able to effectively keep track of organisational business activity and helps enable the scheduling of items for decision-making earlier to facilitate strategic discussions. Evidence that the Business Flow document was proving successful was triangulated through discussions with the Council, where the peer team heard that scrutiny committee meetings were linked to the business flow and that all middle managers had been trained on how to use the



document. This has resulted in improved business planning and performance management, with discussions about risks and opportunities happening at an earlier stage.

The Business Plan covered the period until 2021 and has subsequently been refreshed to encompass a new business objective focussing on climate change and the green recovery, as well as a broad focus on covid recovery across each of the business objectives. The addition of a climate change objective followed the declaration of a climate emergency in the Borough in July 2019. The team heard examples of the Council's work to tackle climate change, including its commitment to becoming a carbon neutral authority by 2040. The target of 2040 was probed, and the Peer Team suggested that the figure be reviewed to consider whether it was ambitious enough. At the time of the follow-up peer challenge, work was already under way and links established with Stroud District Council, who were the first council in Europe to become carbon neutral. Stafford Borough Council was taking positive steps towards fulfilling its climate change priority, including through the designation of two cabinet members and a senior officer as the climate change leads for the authority. However, the Peer Team recommended that the Council's political leadership consider, and confirm, the level of ambition and will it has aligned to its corporate priority on climate change and the green recovery to ensure that appropriate resources are available to deliver the outcomes required.

Change

During the original peer challenge, the team were impressed by Council employees who were noticeably engaged and motivated. It was recommended that the Council immediately look to utilise the talent and skills of staff at all levels of the organisation to help deliver objectives. The follow-up review offered an opportunity to discuss how untapped potential amongst members of staff had been identified during the pandemic. Like many organisations, Stafford relied on employees working flexibly to deliver services differently during the pandemic. One example provided was the growth of the aforementioned internal communications network: the Council has a small communications team, but just before the pandemic a network of individuals across the organisation was created to coordinate internal messages. This has proved successful and enabled staff to develop their skills and indeed use skills that were not traditionally part of their 'day job'. Further examples were provided that evidenced how the whole council had 'banded together' during a time of need. For example, a community hub was set up during the pandemic and enabled staff and elected members to work together to support vulnerable residents. Examples were shared of staff learning new skills or readily helping other departments, for example a member of the Planning Team had created maps that showed locations of 'help hubs' across the Borough and the successful delivery of business support grants



involved a range of staff working collaboratively across both Stafford and Cannock councils. It was clear that Stafford's employees remain committed and enthusiastic and there were a number of examples during the pandemic where teams had 'stepped up to the plate' to help each other. For example, the elections team were redeployed to cover areas where there were staff shortages or increased workload. Stafford Borough Council employees undoubtedly demonstrated flexibility and willingness to support each other and the Council's services during a busy and challenging time for local government.

During the pandemic, the Council had set up internal recovery groups (financial, community, economic and organisational) to lead the recovery programme. This is an example of the Council utilising the skills and talent of its employees by engaging staff from across the organisation, including those who would not have traditionally become involved in corporate projects of this nature. The internal recovery groups have seized the opportunity to harness the skills and ability of existing staff and, indeed, the Council spoke about individual members of staff 'shining through' during the pandemic. The Peer Team felt that this laid the foundations for creating a formal talent management process, so that rising stars could be developed and nurtured within the Council.

The Council can be commended for redistributing resource and utilising skills across departments to ensure that it could continue to deliver its core services, alongside the additional pressures presented by the pandemic. It was noted during the first peer challenge that training for staff had been reduced in line with overall budget pressures. The Council was already taking steps to redress this by linking aspirations and personal goals to performance and the Council's objectives. Further progress has now been made with the introduction of a cross-council Organisational Development Plan and a formal process for recoding all qualifications held by staff, ensuring the leadership team have a truer understanding of the skills across the whole organisation. Training for managers has been stepped up during the pandemic to help support them manage their teams remotely and the Council continues to work with its employees to embed changes and improvements to the Council offices to equip them for more flexible and hybrid working in the future. It is recommended that the council should continue to recognise and celebrate talent within the organisation by formalising arrangements to effectively manage talent and succession plan, so that the Council's rising stars are retained and developed.

Capacity

During the follow-up review, a significant portion of the discussion was dedicated to the joint working arrangements with neighbouring authority, Cannock Chase Council. Since June 2021, Stafford Borough Council's Chief Executive has been on a



secondment to provide services as the joint chief executive of both Stafford Borough and Cannock Chase Councils. Sharing services between the two councils is not an entirely new arrangement, with a number of support, corporate and front-facing services being shared since 2010. Following the resignation of Cannock Chase Council's managing director in February 2021, the decision was made to appoint the Stafford chief executive in a joint role for a period of 12 months, in order to develop a business case for further shared services between the councils.

The Council recognises the level of transformation required to bring the two management teams at Cannock Chase and Stafford together is significant. There is currently no dedicated transformation team at either council and transformation work relies on 'champions' embedded within the services. Although staff are demonstrating willingness and excitement to be involved in transformation projects, the lack of dedicated transformation team means that responsibility for it sits 'on top of the day job'. The peer team found that this formed part of a larger capacity issue, with the recent departure of a number of senior officers from Cannock Chase Council's senior management team adding pressure on the joint chief executive and other senior officers at both authorities. The Peer Team reviewed structure charts for the two councils and noted the flat structures which, through discussion with the Council, they recognised as leading to the bulk of the 'strategic thinking' falling to the Chief Executive, as other senior officers had more operational duties to deal with. The Council have made progress in addressing this issue by appointing a deputy chief executive at each of the councils, but it was noted that within the small teams and flat structures, there was a level of risk and vulnerability if even one or two members of the senior team became unavailable, for example through sickness. Indeed, due to staff absence, the Chief Executive was already taking on the running of the Development Team, which further stretched his own capacity and ability to move forward the transformation work with Cannock Chase.

The Peer Team emphasised that bringing the two councils' management teams together would require considerable investment but that, if successful, rewards such as financial savings and increased capacity would be realised over time. With the political vision for the council's joint arrangements having clear red lines around sovereignty, the council must also consider the significant resources required to run two sets of council meetings, cabinets and committees, for example. The team heard an example of where the Finance Team had become one shared service, but information for each authority continued to be presented in different ways. Streamlining processes across the two councils would help release some capacity, for example, ensuring that back-office systems are the same for both councils, especially where teams are shared.



The Peer Team emphasised that serious consideration should be given to the strategic capacity to undertake the transformation required, if Cannock Chase and Stafford councils are going to join together long term. While the Council has continued to deliver against its objectives during the pandemic, the long-term ability to continue transforming relies on adequate capacity and resources to enable resilience within the leadership team. It was noted, for example, that the new climate change objective had been added to the Business Plan without the removal or reduction in priority of other objectives. The Council's political leadership need to give careful consideration to prioritisation of the objectives in the business plan, in the context of limited budgets and reduced corporate capacity.

During the original Peer Challenge, the team noted that the Council had strong, well-established partnerships and that the Leader and Chief Executive were influential at a regional and national level. It was recommended that the Council continue to capitalise on the goodwill and capacity of relevant partners to help deliver ambitious plans. It is clear that the Council remains an influential partner in the Staffordshire region, and this is demonstrated through its relationship with the County Council and neighbouring boroughs, for example through current discussions around a devolution deal for Staffordshire. There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a major financial impact on the Council due to a loss of income and additional cost pressures that are likely to continue throughout the financial year. However, the exploration of further shared services, the continued impressive economic growth agenda and the move towards more agile working are likely to help the Council to continue its measured and considered approach to budget management. It is impressive that the Council have shown great resilience and commitment to continue delivering their services as well as adapting approaches to support their communities despite the challenges of the pandemic.

3. Key recommendations

The following are the peer team's updated key recommendations to the council:

Recommendation 1:

Serious consideration should be given to the strategic capacity to undertake the transformation required if Cannock Chase and Stafford Borough councils are going to join together long-term. The amount of resource, capacity and transformation required to bring two councils together should not be underestimated. The Council should review priorities alongside capacity to ensure it has the resources to deliver the level of transformation required.

Recommendation 2:

Formalise arrangements to effectively manage talent and succession plan, so that the Council's rising stars are retained and developed. The Council has identified rising stars, who have gone above and beyond during the pandemic, as well as recruiting graduates to specialised roles. A talent management plan will help ensure that those individuals with the greatest potential are retained and developed at the Council.

Recommendation 3:

Undertake a communications review to ensure that the Council is able to positively promote more of what it is doing for its community. The Council has a number of positive stories to tell and communicating these is a strategic responsibility of the whole council leadership and not just a function of the communications department.

Recommendation 4:

The council should consider and confirm the level of ambition and will it has aligned to its corporate priority on climate change. The Council's business plan's three core objectives were expanded in July 2019, when the Council declared a climate emergency. The Council should review this objective to ensure its associated goals accurately reflect the level of political ambition regarding climate change in the Borough.

Overall, the Peer Team felt that Stafford Borough Council had coped well with the challenges and pressures brought about by the pandemic. To continue on their transformation journey, they will need to consider strategic capacity, but the will and enthusiasm of their officers and members stands them in good stead to remain a reliable and influential council.

4. 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. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.



In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Helen is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

Helen.murray@local.gov.uk

Annex A

5. Summary of the peer challenge approach

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 and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers for this follow-up CPC were:

- Kathy O'Leary, Chief Executive of Stroud Borough Council
- Councillor William Nunn, Breckland Council
- Helen Jenkins, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

Scope and Focus

As part of this Corporate Peer Challenge follow-up, the team explored progress against the recommendations from the original peer challenge. The aim of this work was not review performance in service areas at depth, but to review progress against the corporate recommendations made previously. The peer team had considered five questions which formed the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges, as they are areas that are critical to the councils' performance improvement. They are:

1. Understanding of local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?

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4. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
 5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In the original recommendations, were:

Communication

1. Commission an LGA Communications review to support the ambitions of the business plan. External and internal communication requires examination and coordination across to organisation to ensure consistent and transparent messages to Members, staff and stakeholders.

2. Develop a communications strategy to celebrate and communicate the vision set out in the Corporate Business Plan. The Council can point to a number of achievements and examples of community work with positive social impact, however, these appear to be less visible within corporate communications. The Council should seek to more proactively communicate the positive work is undertaking for its community, alongside its growth achievements.

3. Maintain and enhance communications in respect of delivery of current and future plans. As Stafford continues its ambitious journey of transformational change it will be increasingly important to communicate the vision, achievements and plans to key stakeholders to bring partners on the journey with the Council.

Organisation

4. Publish an effective and measurable forward plan. The Leadership Team have taken progressive steps towards developing a long term forward plan setting out Cabinet priorities which includes timescales and milestones. This should be finalised and published to ensure actions have appropriate accountability and that there are mechanisms in place to ensure timely and considered decisions, performance metrics and risk management including contingencies.

5. Review risk appetite and make difficult decisions now to transform and facilitate the delivery of objectives. The Council has an ambitious plan of growth which relies on the pace of change accelerating. It is timely for the Council to grasp the opportunity for increasing the pace of change and review its risk appetite. This may mean taking bold decisions about future structures and direction.



6. Continue to implement new scrutiny structure and ensure appropriate training to enable effective scrutiny and policy development. The alignment of scrutiny committees with the corporate objectives offers an opportunity to provide more predecision scrutiny and policy development. To realise the potential of overview and scrutiny, the Council should offer scrutiny Members training and support to continue to develop essential skills required for robust scrutiny.

Change

7. The Council should immediately look to utilise the talent and skills of staff and Members at all levels of the organisation to deliver objectives. The Council has a wealth of committed and motivated Members and employees with a desire to facilitate change. Consideration should be given to undertaking a skills audit of the workforce to utilise existing expertise and develop talent.

8. Develop, communicate and implement an organisational development programme. To achieve the delivery of corporate objectives the Peer Team recommend the benefit of a cross-council approach to organisational change/development which aligns the Council's workforce activities and skills to the delivery of corporate priorities. The development and implementation of an organisational development programme should include the creation and communication of expectations, values and behaviours required to support change.

9. Continue to capitalise the goodwill and capacity of relevant partners to deliver plans. Stafford has a proven track record at building and facilitating effective partnerships and these relationships can help the Council unlock capacity to deliver its ambitious goals. The Council should ensure that there are adequate and robust arrangements in place so that they can continue to engage the right and relevant partners in the delivery of current and future plans.

10. Identify financial resources to support change management programme. The Council has a consistent and stable financial outlook with a balanced budget and clean audit opinions. Financial resources should be reviewed to identify a budget to invest in a comprehensive change management programme to support the organisational transformational required to meet objectives. This may include a dedicated programme team to provide a focus and drive on key projects.

The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met and material that they read.



The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a statement prepared by the Council which provided an update on the progress made against the 2018 recommendations, as well as how the Council had responded to the coronavirus pandemic. Alongside the progress statement, the council provided numerous documents including their delivery plans for strategic objectives, their communications strategy, climate change and green recovery strategy, staff survey results and member briefings.

The team then spent an afternoon virtually with the Leader and Chief Executive of Stafford Borough Council and the Corporate Business and Partnerships Manager during which they gathered information and explored key lines of enquiry.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.