


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Sandwell Council

26th and 27th October 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) across the four days from 31st January to 3rd February 2022. The council published the related report on 7th June 2022, with this forming part of a wider report to Full Council on the council's Improvement Plan which was produced in response to the statutory direction of the Secretary of State and the findings from the various forms of external challenge that the council has undertaken over the last year or so.

The progress review that the peer team has undertaken now is an integral part of the peer challenge process. It is designed to provide the opportunity for the council to:

- Update peers on the progress made in relation to the recommendations made by the peer team and to receive feedback on this
- Consider the peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were on-site, including any further support needs
- Discuss impact and learning from the progress made to date

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

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at Sandwell Council took place across the two days of Wednesday 26th and Thursday 27th October. The following individuals, drawn from the original peer team, were involved:

- Kath O'Dwyer, Chief Executive, St Helens Council
- Councillor Chris Read, Leader, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

- Viv Geary, LGA Associate with a background in governance and a former Monitoring Officer
- Helen Murray, Principal Adviser (West Midlands), LGA
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The following written feedback is provided using a framework that reflects a number of the key themes in the council's Improvement Plan.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Strategic Direction, Corporate Oversight and Partnership and Relationships

Much greater stability can now be seen in the council, both politically and managerially. There were a number of changes at Cabinet level in May this year, following the elections, with these involving a combination of new appointments and people having a change in their portfolio. The recently recruited Director team are now well settled in their roles.

The Leader received glowing endorsements during our discussions with stakeholders both internally and externally. People particularly highlighted her inclusive and supportive approach. She is seen to be a Leader for Sandwell who is engaged in all the right places – internally, locally, sub-regionally and nationally.

People really value the Managing Director's style and what he has brought to the council and to the borough. He will be a tough act to follow but there is excitement at the impending permanent Chief Executive appointment. Whilst this transition will represent change in the short term it will add to the sense of stability in due course.

External partners we spoke to within the sub-region are seeing the council now being much better engaged at that level, with a notable difference made in just a few short months. Sandwell's voice is now being heard more widely and the council and its leadership is felt to be making an effective contribution. The political leadership has also demonstrated a willingness to give a 'contra view' where, on a limited number of occasions, that has been appropriate as it has sought to act in the best interests of

the borough. There is appropriate and consistent council representation in key strategic fora, although Sandwell remains less visible below Leader, Cabinet, Chief Executive and Director level in networks and bodies at more of a working group and networking level.

Cabinet is forming well following the recent changes and in meeting them they demonstrated a strong sense of 'team', appropriately balancing the respecting of individuals' areas of responsibility with ensuring collective understanding, responsibility and decision-making. The managerial Leadership Team has settled following its' completion but now has to become central to a 'One Council, One Team' approach and driving key organisational-wide agendas. These include improving customer service and establishing the desired organisational culture.

The leadership stability that now exists has enabled a clearer approach to internal communications to be established. As a result of this and the communications channels that have been put in place, staff are feeling much better communicated with from the senior leadership level – albeit with a recognition that moving to more two-way communication will be beneficial.

Cabinet and Leadership Team are working increasingly well at both a bilateral and collective level. At the heart of this sits a 'no surprises' principle. Cabinet members outlined to us that they now feel much better apprised of emerging issues and senior officers indicated a greater confidence in drawing elected members' attention to challenging issues.

The officers and elected members that we met are open about the need for continued change and improvement in the way the organisation functions and are committed to delivering it. A single Improvement Plan has been developed responding to the statutory direction of the Secretary of State and the findings from the various forms of external challenge that the council has undertaken over the last year or so. The Plan was approved at the Full Council meeting on 7th June this year and is designed to provide the organisation with a clear direction for its improvement journey and aid the continued delivery of the council's strategic priorities reflected in the Corporate Plan 2021-2025. Governance mechanisms to oversee the delivery of the Improvement Plan are outlined within it. Reporting on progress against the Plan is reassuring Cabinet, whilst officers that we met from a range of levels within the

organisation believe the changes that are being seen will be sustained this time around, contrasting with what has been experienced previously.

A new performance management framework has been established, with this having been approved by Full Council on 12th April this year. It is enabling a much better understanding of how the council is performing. This links to the 'no surprises' principle and Cabinet reflected that they are now gaining insights to issues more, and at an earlier stage, compared with before. Quarterly reporting to Cabinet on the four key components within the framework commenced last month. These components are 'Improvement' (including delivery of the Corporate Plan), 'Customer Experience', 'Financial Performance' and 'Organisational Health'. The quarterly report additionally features the council's Strategic Risk Register. The framework, and the information and insights it provides, act as a prime example of the way in which an increased evidence-base for decision-making can be seen in the council. It also provides the basis for a 'golden thread' that enables the links to be made between the council's strategic objectives and the plans at directorate and service level. This thread can be articulated at Director, Assistant Director and Service Manager level but not yet below that.

Key achievements across the council in recent months include:

- Children's Services progressing to 'Requires Improvement'
- The relationship between the council and the Children's Trust being seen to have continued to progress and the contract having been extended
- The delivery on time and budget of the Sandwell Aquatic Centre and the contribution of the borough and the council to the success of the 2022 Commonwealth Games – with this positively impacting on reputation and confidence
- The smooth letting of the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) transport contract, capitalising on learning from before
- Improved management of the council's waste contract
- Plans developing for a shift to leisure facilities and related services being delivered through a local authority trading company

- The creation of an integrated health and care facility (Harvest View) – within a broader picture of good relationships with health, including positive engagement with NHS ‘place’ arrangements
- Coping with everything that has been thrown at the organisation, including supporting communities and businesses during the pandemic and the growing cost of living crisis; responding to the Ukrainian refugee situation; and managing the implications of the economic challenges for the council’s finances

The council commissioned a residents’ survey this year and there are a number of positive findings that the organisation will hope to see repeated in future years. This includes satisfaction with the council being slightly higher than the national average (66% compared to 62%); trust in the council standing at 67% compared to a national average of 58%; and 60% of respondents indicating they feel the council acts on the concerns of local residents compared to 52% nationally. Satisfaction with waste services; street cleaning; maintenance of both roads and pavements; sport and leisure services; and services and support for children and young people were all higher than the national average although the reverse was true for library services; services and support for older people; and parks and open spaces.

An employee engagement survey has also been undertaken this year, following that from 2018 and with 61% of staff responding to it. The results have been widely shared and are being used to inform discussions and thinking at directorate and team levels and there has been a corporate response to them. The latter includes placing ‘organisational culture’ at the heart of the Improvement Plan and the enhancing of internal communications, as touched on earlier. Both the residents’ survey and the employee survey will be built on through ‘pulse’ surveys – a brief and regular set of questions posed to people – being undertaken going forward.

Cabinet is building a track record of taking difficult decisions. A prime example is that of approving plans for the building of a primary school, 190 homes and a public park on the site of the former Brandhall Golf Course which is currently being scrutinised as part of a Call-In of the Cabinet decision. Another example is the introduction of charging for the collection of green garden waste which is due to be considered by Cabinet in November. What this approach in recent months reflects is Cabinet maintaining a focus on ‘doing the right thing’ as it sees it, even when the going gets

tough. This is in contrast with a view that criticism from ‘the loudest voices’ might have driven some decisions previously.

Cabinet are showing a commitment and willingness to face the further tough decisions that will undoubtedly be required over the coming months and years as the financial challenge facing the council continues. Whilst there is clear recognition amongst all those we spoke to that the financial challenge is only likely to worsen over the next year and beyond, there is currently an absence of a whole organisation view of both the scale of this and how it will be addressed. Establishing a clear shared understanding of the extent of the budget gap (we recognise the fluid situation that exists at present makes establishing certainty difficult) will be important in focusing effort and attention and identifying and implementing a whole-council approach to solutions. In a context of the ‘One Council, One Team’ philosophy acting as a key driver for the organisation, ensuring a corporate and cross-cutting approach to addressing the financial challenge will be important in order to avoid retrenchment on the part of individual areas functions and services and the resulting siloed thinking and action.

As we touched on earlier, people have coped with everything that has been thrown at the organisation in recent times. This has been taking its toll, but the demands on the organisation and its people aren’t going to dissipate. All councils are experiencing increased demand around ‘business as usual’ and having to adapt to deal with change in what ‘business as usual’ represents and how it is delivered. They are also all facing very significant financial challenges. Sandwell is having to cope with all of this but additionally is delivering an extensive Improvement Plan.

The injection of additional capacity in key areas has helped to drive improvement. Examples include governance expertise to inform and support Constitutional revisions; project and programme management specialists; additional communications professionals; and support with the development of the performance management framework. Often in our discussions, people indicated that the injection of additional capacity would be the answer to the challenges within their spheres but there needs to be a much greater sense of realism around this, given the financial picture facing the council. Thus, in order to make things feel as achievable as possible going forward, there needs to be a stocktake of the level of available

resource, the pace and phasing of change that will be required going forward and where any additional capacity that can be secured will deliver the greatest impact.

Governance and Decision-Making

A key strand of the council's Improvement Plan relates to the 'Constitution and Governance Framework'. An inclusive process developing changes to the Constitution, involving cross-party engagement, saw those changes put before Full Council in July this year being agreed very smoothly. This included revisions to the Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules; Financial Regulations; and Council Procedure Rules. Things appear on track for further revisions to be agreed through Full Council in November and December, including elements relating to the Scheme of Delegations; Access to Information Procedure Rules; and the Protocol for Member/Employee Relations. An annual review of the Constitution going forward has been agreed in order to enable on-going refinement and adaptation of the way the council operates.

One of the most noticeable changes in recent months is the much-improved set of relationships between officers and elected members. The training linked to this has been highly valued and has played an important role. The positive way Cabinet and the Leadership Team engage with one other is modelling the way.

There is a note of caution to signal here though, with an emerging risk around the poor organisational responsiveness to the customer, and to casework issues brought forward by elected members, starting to generate tensions on the part of both councillors and officers, thus undermining the good progress that has been made in relationships. This needs to be avoided through on-going and intensive focus on the 'Ward and Casework Management' element of the Improvement Plan and the work around the 'customer journey' that is being embarked upon.

In the same way that training in respect of officer and elected member relationships has been highly valued, the development activity relating to public speaking and chairing skills – delivered through an external facilitator – has also gone down very well with councillors. This forms part of a very positive story in relation to elected

member training and development more generally, including the induction programme put in place following the elections in May and 'all member briefings' on key issues. There is a comprehensive training and development programme now in place, informed by personal development plans for councillors. The programme is ensuring increased knowledge and understanding and is injecting external perspectives. Councillors are supplementing this with increasingly getting 'out and about' to draw in learning, including a recent visit to Leeds to look at customer contact centre arrangements there and linking up as Cabinet members with opposite numbers in neighbouring boroughs.

The council is committed to reviewing the elected member development programme at regular intervals going forward. It will be important to ensure that the pace of delivery is made to feel sustainable, with some councillors the peer team spoke to reflecting an intensity to it in recent months that risks being too demanding in terms of their time.

A revision of the role of, and approach to, Overview and Scrutiny also represents an important element of the council's Improvement Plan. This was embarked upon in the latter part of last year and it is clear from people we spoke to that this key strand of the council's governance arrangements is going from strength to strength. Regular meetings between members of Overview and Scrutiny and the Cabinet, along with discussions with senior officers, enables the exploration of opportunities for Overview and Scrutiny to help to shape strategy and policy at the pre-decision-making level. Recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny are also regularly now being considered by Cabinet and flowing into Leadership Team. The Committee Chairs are reporting regularly to Full Council on the work and impact of their respective Overview and Scrutiny Committee. 'Job roles' and a framework to guide the way Overview and Scrutiny works, at both an individual and Committee level, have also been developed and have been supplemented with a range of training.

The renewed sense of energy and drive that is being seen with Overview and Scrutiny is replicated across other key committees and the Chairs are integral to this. Mature engagement between the Leader, Cabinet, Committee Chairs and officers is providing for good planning and work programming across the different committees. One example is the mapping of their respective remits between Overview and

Scrutiny and Audit Committee in relation to monitoring progress in the delivery of the Improvement Plan.

There is also a sense more widely of a 'maturing politics' within the council. This is reflected in the considered approach taken by the Opposition; the cross-party working that has been taking place on the revisions to the Constitution; and the way in which the Call-In of the Cabinet decision on the Brandhall site was handled by all involved. Standards complaints have dropped significantly, which could be used as a proxy indicator of the improvements that have been seen in relation to elected member behaviour and governance.

Full Council in November will consider whether there is a shift to a four yearly electoral cycle. A report outlining the key considerations, including the public consultation outcome on the matter, will be presented by the Director of Law and Governance to inform the thinking and decision-making of elected members.

'Customer Journey' and 'Organisational Culture'

The work to be delivered in relation to improving the 'customer journey' is being widely talked about in the council. There is a long way to go on this, with organisational responsiveness to customers and casework, raised by elected members on behalf of residents, still being a major issue.

The message has come through loud and clear that addressing the issues that exist is a major priority for the council. Staff that we spoke to are welcoming of this but there is, as yet, a lack of clarity about what this will entail and the way forward. This includes what a 'whole council' programme and approach will look like; what the expectations on services and directorates are and the roles that they are required to play; and who is leading the work and where the related accountability sits.

At a more basic level, there needs to be a quickly established shared understanding regarding what the council's service standards and timescales for responding are currently and/or will be going forward.

It is recognised that it is only in recent weeks that the prioritisation of the improvement of the 'customer journey' has been communicated. It is important now

to cement the commitment that has been given and capitalise upon the enthusiasm that has been generated, by establishing clear leadership of the agenda.

'Organisational culture' forms the first theme in the council's Improvement Plan. Activity is already underway in relation to this, including the identification of 'culture champions' and their involvement in 'listening events' which will link to work on values and behaviours. However, things feel very much at the outset in relation to this key strand of work and clarity is still required in key respects. This includes what the 'organisational culture' change agenda in Sandwell will cover; how it links to the work on the 'customer journey' – given the inter-related nature of these two key strands of work; and the connection with the whole organisation transformation plan that the council has indicated it intends to develop.

Currently it is difficult to see what an 'organisational culture' change programme does or will entail. Driving forward the 'One Council, One Team' philosophy would logically form a key component of it. Another strand might usefully relate to the 'return to the office' arrangements post-pandemic which require further focus and clarification of expectations. People spoke of the way in which corporate guidelines have been provided around the presence of people and teams in the office and some valued the freedom they had been given in finding ways to balance meeting these requirements with the needs and preferences of their staff, whilst others sought greater clarity on expectations and greater equity. It is, however, clear that approaches are evolving and that learning is taking place. This could all usefully be drawn together to inform a further round of corporate guidance to support meeting customer need; maximising the effectiveness of the use of office space; and maintaining and enhancing relationships within and between teams.

Whether workforce planning constitutes part of the organisational culture change programme also needs to be clarified. The original corporate peer challenge report outlined the need for role titles and functions to better describe 'what they say on the tin' and a requirement for consistency in terminology and managerial spans of control and levels of responsibility. There remains a lack of clarity around this. Additionally, recruitment and retention challenges are biting, as they are everywhere, and there are no easy answers, with concerted effort and creativity, possibly encompassing other councils and sectors, being required to develop solutions. There is also an

issue of succession planning to be addressed, linked to the age profile of the workforce.

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) represents another key area of work that has been identified as an organisational priority. There is a clear commitment to the EDI agenda, reflected in the investment that has been made in creating a team to drive it, but things are still very much at the outset. The EDI agenda must be made integral to the work around 'organisational culture'.

Essentially, the 'customer journey', EDI and 'organisational culture' are major pieces of inter-related work that are fundamental to future success and require a clear plan and sense of deliverability.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Sandwell Council for its engagement in both the corporate peer challenge and the progress review. We recognise that the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will want to reflect on the findings and how to utilise them to support the council's improvement journey.

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. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser for the West Midlands) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk