

St Helens Borough Council

LGA Remote Peer Support – Summary

Background

On 17th March 2021, the LGA facilitated a two hour remote session with Cabinet members and the Executive Leadership Team at St Helens Council. The purpose of this session was to give Cabinet members and senior officers:

- Time to reflect on the progress made to date against previous LGA recommendations
- Space to reflect on the roles members and officers play individually and collectively in relation to policy and strategy
- Time to explore how a policy led approach to localities based working can further help the Council achieve the strategic priorities in the Borough Strategy.

Facilitating this session on behalf of the LGA was the following team:

- **Cllr Stephen Houghton** – Leader of Barnsley Council (Labour)
- **Claire Hogan** (LGA Principal Adviser)
- **Dan Archer** (LGA Programme Manager)
- **Emma Roberts** (LGA Project Support Team).

This session was the latest part of a tailored package of support provided by the LGA to the Council over recent years. This has included:

- intensive support for children's services
- improvement support for adult services, finance and communications
- a culture review, alongside ongoing support for both members and officers.

A key part of this support package was a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in January 2019 and most recently a LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel in September 2020.

This session was an opportunity for the LGA to provide high level reflections on progress made in recent years; of which there are many. However, it should be noted that reflections / observations have not been made in the same depth as would be given from a CPC revisit which involves a peer challenge team, being on site for a couple of days to review progress more thoroughly. The Council have stated that they are eager to have this revisit as soon as possible.

The session however enabled peers to reflect on the progress that the Council has made since an earlier session with Cabinet members in late 2017. It also enabled the Council to share their assessment of progress since the CPC, subsequent culture review and LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel.

Unlike a Corporate Peer Challenge report the Council are not obliged to publish this note, as it is an informal summary of the most common reflections back from members, officers and the peer team at this session which can be used to support ongoing and continuous improvement.

The Council's position on progress against the previous LGA recommendations

On behalf of the Council, the Assistant Chief Executive was able to present an assessment of progress made against previous recommendations from the LGA. In the Council's own position statement, a number of the recommendations are shown as having been significantly progressed. These recommendations are shown in bold below, with an accompanying commentary which summarises the Council's understanding of their position:

- **Ensuring that improving children's services remains a clear corporate priority.** A children's services improvement plan is in place, with progress monitored regularly. Further to this, improvement has also been seen through an OFSTED monitoring visit. The Council awaits a full OFSTED re-inspection to assess the level of progress made from the current 'Inadequate' rating.
- **Enhance capacity at the Assistant Chief Executive level to support change and improve the co-ordination of decision making.** A new Assistant Chief Executive has been in post since May 2020 and the Council can now demonstrate ongoing progress across their significant and wide ranging transformation ambitions.
- **Ensure the review of the Council's strategy engages members, officers, partners and residents, leading to wider understanding and ownership.** A consultation period from August 2020 led up to the publication of a new Borough Strategy in March 2021. All other strategies now feed into this document. A common approach has now been adopted for the development of new or revised policy and strategy. Development sessions are held to provide a forum to interrogate the evidence, benchmark against others and set the scale of ambition. Members are able to use this to provide an overarching policy direction and officers develop the strategy accordingly, there have been examples of this across the organisation.
- **Address the Council's pressing financial position.** The Council agreed a budget and new Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2021/22 in March. The budget includes permanent savings options for 2021/22, with further options identified for the period beyond this. This will help the Council to deal with budget pressures on an ongoing basis. The challenge now – like for all councils, is ensuring this budget and the relevant savings options are delivered against to avoid any further future reliance on one-off reserves.
- **Develop a capital and investment funding strategy which is linked to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and takes account of the Council's priorities.** Both a 'Capital and Investment Strategy' and a new MTFS were signed off in March 2021.
- **Develop and invest in a more proactive external communications strategy.** This strategy is now in place, place branding has also been reviewed and an organisational rebrand completed.

In addition to the above, the Council continues to progress the below recommendations, "*putting many of the building blocks in place*" for further improvement:

- **The Chief Executive should work with other senior officers to develop a more distributed leadership model.** A significant organisational restructure was completed between November 2020 and January 2021. A new senior leadership team is now in place and a programme of employee engagement developed.
- **Provide a development programme for both members and officers to improve joint working, with an improved, common understanding of roles and expected behaviours which addresses the issue of poor member behaviour.** Development sessions for Cabinet members and the ELT now support collective Policy and Strategy development.
- **Overhaul performance and financial reporting arrangements to provide clearer information which supports better decision making.** A new performance management framework is due to be put in place which is based on the Borough Strategy priorities.
- **Ensure constructive performance challenge and robust performance management is in place across the organisation.** ELT/Cabinet and Scrutiny reviews of performance have been put in place to support the achievement of this.
- **Develop a programme to support adults in work to develop their skills to progress their careers and earnings.** The Council's Economic Recovery Plan now includes a programme to support adults into work.
- **Develop and invest in a comprehensive approach to organisational development which includes strengthening internal communications and engagement.** An Organisational Development and Design Team is now in place, with internal communications still being developed and an organisational cultural transformation programme established.

It is important to also highlight that a significant amount of the progress noted above has been achieved since February 2020, whilst the Council has been also leading the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period the Council has also recruited and established an almost entirely new senior management team. The Council embraced the opportunity for a LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel in September 2020, and have begun to progress the recommendations made, including:

- **Develop clear priorities for modernisation followed by a roadmap for delivery with sufficient resources to ensure success.** A Council wide programme and reset and recovery roadmap has been established. Each directorate now has a more specific programme of transformation in place. The Council were awarded a Transforming and Innovating Public Services Award for their new 'Ways of Working Programme' recently.
- **Define, develop, and embed a new relationship with the local community and voluntary, community and faith sector.** The Council is developing a new VCSE Strategy in place to take this forward which includes the voluntary sector having a seat at the Integrated Care Partnership Board.
- **Capitalising on the opportunities available – health and social care integration.** The Council has reviewed the arrangements for St Helens Cares and developed an Integrated Care Partnership structure, which has been agreed by Cabinet and the local 'Peoples' board.

- **Adjusting to the opportunities available and challenges presented – Place.** An Economic Recovery Plan was adopted in December 2020 and a regeneration and growth pipeline has been established.
- **Developing and delivering a compelling vision for localities-based working.** The model is due to be agreed by Cabinet in March, work towards which is ongoing and was a feature of this session.

Members and officers at the session consistently fed back similar observations about the changes that have contributed to this progress. These include:

- The setting of clear, well communicated goals which are well understood and ‘owned’ collectively.
- The development of a working relationship between members and officers which is more positive honest, and collaborative
- Greater clarity in relation to roles and responsibilities and the decision making process with a much more effective use of the role of Cabinet and ELT development sessions.

As the Council continues to progress its improvement agenda over the next 12 months and beyond it will need to do this whilst balancing the requirements of leading a local recovery from COVID-19. In doing so, members and officers highlighted particular challenges that they must overcome – including the capacity challenges this will present, maintaining the level of energy and resilience required throughout this period, delivering within the financial constraints as well as wider policy impacts on the borough (for example NHS reform).

Feedback from the LGA team

Members of the peer team fed back on the extent of improvement seen at the Council compared to when this specific LGA package of support began in October 2017. The shift from then is significant and is *“a credit to both members and officers of the Council”*. This improvement has put the Council in a much more positive position and has laid firm foundations from which the Council can go on to achieve higher levels of performance in future months and years.

The Council has a clear vision in place and is further developing the roles it takes in a St Helens partnership context and in the wider Liverpool City region. This was not the case to the same degree previously with members not recognising a single vision and set of priorities.

From the feedback given to the team during the session it appears that decision making is now being shaped through the use of a clear set of corporately owned priorities. This will remain important as the Council embraces a localities based delivery model. The Council was challenged previously by the LGA to ensure that children’s services was a corporately owned priority (which had been missing in earlier corporate plan documents). *‘Ensure Children and Young People have a positive start in life’* is now seen in the six corporate priorities, this prioritisation is also seen through the investments and structural decisions the Council has taken. The improvement in children’s services and sense of self awareness in this area is also starting to be seen through the feedback provided by OFSTED in 2020. The Council is keen to have a full re-inspection to demonstrate this progress further.

As the Council moves forward, avoiding “...slipping back to the old ways of working” will be crucially important. The Council, as recommended in the Corporate Peer Challenge has put in place additional senior capacity, developed a clearer recognition of roles and a ‘rhythm’ of decision making which ensures that decisions are made and implemented without drift and delay. From all this, the Council now appears more confident in its ability to address proactively its future challenges.

Improvement can be seen in the approach members are able to take to balancing the responsibility to champion the needs of their individual wards, whilst also representing the democratically agreed positions of the Council overall. This will be increasingly important as the Council looks to adopt a localities based model of service delivery.

The Localities Model

During the session members and officers were supported to discuss the role of the localities model in more detail and how this can be used to help meet the six corporate priorities in the Borough Strategy. Time was given to consider the practical considerations that may arise from the new ways of working and some of the points that members and officers may need to remain mindful of and / or revisit. A summary of which includes:

- A ‘localities’ based approach will mean thinking through how *most* things could be delivered across a place – not just specific services or the work of individual organisations. Partner buy-in and commitment will be important to secure a more ‘joined-up approach’. The Council are already engaging with some partners on this. Celebrating the shared successes and communicating the opportunities of this way of working will help to build further momentum as this progress.
- As the council advances this change programme, there will inevitably be some things to avoid, some things to trial on a small scale and some things to leave until a later stage as the model grows and matures. Managing this programme and the risks in this way includes ‘maintaining the basics’ whilst making this shift.
- The adaptation of existing borough wide methods of service delivery is central to this localities model. This means where appropriate, making service delivery footprints more relevant to local area footprints, bringing a balancing of benefits to the borough overall. Beyond this, the potential for doing this in a localised #StHelensTogether way are there. There are examples which the Council are mindful of, such as exploring how the opportunity of helping residents to volunteer could be made more relevant and impactful when applied to a localised footprint.
- Ensuring the expectation for a #StHelensTogether way of working is consistently used to shape the revised, localised service offer can therefore be an important point of consistency. This should be a central feature from the start and be included in how the change is communicated out to local residents. The appointment of a Director of Communities has a clear role in this but can’t be responsible for the roll out and implementation in its entirety. This way of working will require all officers and members to buy in as it represents a significant shift to the way in which services are delivered.
- Not everything the Council wants to trial at a local level will work in each locality. Factors such as identity, history, community assets and the strength of community groups, as well as expectations and needs will create different conditions. Members

often have the most informed understanding of this in their locality, how this insight is socialised amongst members and officers will be important.

- The quality of relationships and interaction between ‘the face of the Council’ and the communities in each locality will also make a big difference. Having a policy led approach which encourages a culture of working with and expectations to do so will be important. This will include support for communities to navigate the existing offer both from the Council and others, supporting local communities and VCSE organisations to develop their own solutions, challenging perceptions, and assumptions where this is relevant.
- A shift to a new operating model like this is a significant change. What this means for members and how they continue to work with officers may be something to review and revisit as the approach develops.
- There are risks which will need to be carefully managed – particularly given the financial challenge the Council is addressing more widely. The Council is looking to embrace an evidence led approach to levels of service delivery in different parts of the borough. Ensuring this is timely (or even robustly predictive) as well as open to reliable ‘softer’ local intelligence can help in this regard. Equally, for demand led services, continuously building the universal, early help and preventative support to communities (whether delivered by the Council, its partners, or the community) can help the Council to manage these risks.

Next steps

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 and connect the Council to additional support, advice and guidance on the areas highlighted in this note. Claire Hogan (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the Council and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk