

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

South Staffordshire District Council

Feedback

21st July 2023





Contents

- 1. Introduction 3
- 2. Summary of the approach..... 3
- 3. Progress Review - Feedback..... 4
- 4. Final thoughts and next steps..... 12

1. Introduction

South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC) undertook a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during October 2022 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC. Taking place approximately ten months after the CPC, 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 SSDC for its commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress 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 took place on 21st July 2023.

The Review focused on the key recommendations made by the peer team as part of the CPC and the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Duncan McGinty, LGA Peer and former Leader of Sedgemoor District Council
- Rob Mitchell, Chief Executive - Charnwood Borough Council
- Francesca Stott, National Adviser – Local Government Association
- James Millington, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met with the following colleagues at SSDC:

- Cllr Roger Lees, Leader
- Dave Heywood, Chief Executive
- Jackie Smith, Corporate Director Communities and Wellbeing
- Annette Roberts, Corporate Director Infrastructure and Business Growth
- Lorraine Fowkes, Director Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer)
- Clodagh Peterson – Assistant Director Partnerships Policy & Partnerships

Ahead of this Progress Review the council shared an updated CPC recommendations action plan and key documents as background for the discussions.

3. Progress Review – Feedback

The peer team heard how the CPC has been valuable to the council for building on the strong foundations already in place, and reflecting on areas for further improvement. SSDC's response since the CPC has been to place an emphasis on taking the council to the 'next level'. The peer team and the council acknowledge this can be challenging due to the nature of making incremental improvements but the peer team were impressed with how SSDC is striving to continue to move to excellence. It was clear from the Progress Review that SSDC has taken onboard the feedback from the peers and is progressing well against its action plan.

The session focused on discussions around the key recommendations made as part of the CPC and this report outlines these in themes, as below. This is not intended to capture the details of all of the discussions but provide an overview of progress since the CPC in October 2022.

The Customer and Outcomes

A key recommendation made in the CPC related to the development of a consistent approach to setting service standards, mapping customer journeys and measuring

satisfaction to support SSDC's further improvement. The peer team considered this to be an important component in SSDC achieving its ambitions. Since the CPC, SSDC has focused on developing Service Standards in areas across the council including in Welfare Services, Enterprise Services and Planning Services. To do this the council has built upon the existing 'pinch point' exercise undertaken by its Assistant Directors - which produces an overview of anticipated activity in addition to business as usual, so SSDC can identify issues and mitigate the impact. Considerations around equalities and inclusion, locality needs and community engagement plans were factored into this process.

SSDC has reviewed its Customer Feedback policy and has included the council's expected response standards to digital communications as well as more traditional routes, including handwritten correspondence. The policy now recognises the extent of different channels which individuals communicate with SSDC and the organisation's expected approach to making a response. The peer team agreed this was good progress and discussed the potential for gaining immediate customer satisfaction feedback from callers to SSDC's call centre – and the council confirmed there are plans to develop this in future as part of its ongoing approach to utilising feedback.

The council is developing a Community Engagement Plan to ensure it is engaging with communities on a coordinated and planned basis rather than from individual service areas. As part of its approach SSDC has been using its Aspire staff development programme where programme participants have a project this year to develop guidance and a toolkit for council managers on community engagement. This complements the council's Locality model to ensure the council is inclusive and all the representatives of the community are able to engage with it.

During the CPC the team raised concerns about the timescales around the Customer Experience Improvement Programme, making a recommendation for SSDC to consider its capacity to deliver this and to clarify outcomes. The peer team was impressed that SSDC had completed the refresh of the website by March 2023 and

this was delivered on time and budget. As part of this SSDC ensured that the content was updated and importantly that it was more accessible and inclusive for all users. This included SSDC testing that the website could be understood by a 9 year old reader – by having a group of 9 year olds provide feedback to shape the content and navigation of the website. SSDC confirmed that key outcomes for the Programme are to ensure that individuals can transact with the council in ways which suit them – there is a strong emphasis from Members that the website will enable digital transactions but that this is not the only option available. There has been early success in this digital approach, for example in issuing the garden waste permits more than 90% of customers were happy to complete this online. The peer team heard how the next phase of the Programme will build on this, making the website increasingly more transactional for customers. Council service areas are currently identifying the high volume customer areas to help inform the next stage of this two year Programme. The new online forms will also include some community engagement to test and challenge the approach. The peer team agree this staging is right and the longer term Programme makes sense to roll-out incrementally. The group discussed how the council will want to ensure it retains the balance between good customer interaction which it is so passionate about alongside transaction options via the website for services.

Since the CPC SSDC has also reviewed its wider approach to customer interactions, which was an important area for Members. This includes the council's Contact Centre which has been restructured to target the high volume areas – including the welfare services and frontline environmental services, establishing teams dedicated to support these areas and their customer interactions. This was established in March 2023, with SSDC recruiting staff into these roles. SSDC will be testing and reviewing the outcomes of this approach during this first year.

The group discussed the recommendation made around the role of the operational performance dashboard and consistency and quality of service provision. The council confirmed how the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) reviews the dashboard to challenge performance and also uses this as a basis for committing resources.

For example, the peer team heard how performance in the Welfare Advice Service had been impacted by an increase in demand due to cost of living and the dashboard allowed CLT to spot this and commit additional resources and engage a third party to support improvement. This investment improved performance, bringing the service back within performance targets. The dashboard has been utilised to monitor and respond to developments in Leisure – monitoring the membership figures following a £3M leisure centre refurbishment programme as well as allowing the council to monitor debtors and creditors, and make decisions about investing in this service.

The dashboard will be kept under review to be flexible, respond to issues and support SSDC's approach in being flexible in its use of resources. The peer team were pleased to hear how the dashboard was supporting the council and the use of operational indicators was allowing CLT to respond as needed. The group also discussed how as part of its IT programme SSDC will consider the value in using software to help automate performance monitoring in future.

Finance and Commercial Activity

In the CPC feedback to the council in October the peer team noted that '*the council has strong financial management and this is reflected in both its financial reporting and level of reserves*'. Notwithstanding the challenges facing other councils, including significant pay and inflationary pressures, during the course of this Progress Review the peer team heard that the council remains in a strong position and the provisional outturn (subject to audit) indicates a draw on General Fund reserves of £0.623M - which is £0.427M better than originally budgeted. SSDC will still be utilising reserves in 2022/23 but the position has improved compared to previously.

SSDC continues to operate its Resource Planning and Prioritisation process and is currently anticipating achieving a balanced 5 year MTFs. The council was anticipating utilising a managed use of reserves of £1.7M in 2023/24 but this is now expected to reduce due to a combination of over performing investments and

favourable interest rates. In subsequent years SSDC is anticipating having a balanced budget without utilising reserves. Savings and efficiencies remain part of its approach and Cabinet and CLT discussed this in June and will be working through savings and investments in mid-September with the wider Member group. Efficiencies could in part be delivered through the investments the council has already made in digital.

Following the CPC the peer team recommended that SSDC consider how its commercial approach was being adopted across its business as usual, contract management and income recovery functions. SSDC is addressing this through a restructure of CLT and recent appointment to a new Assistant Director with a remit for maximising the council's commercial and estates programme. The council has also invested in the capacity within its transactional services to manage the creditors and the debtors, to maximise income for SSDC. The peer team consider these steps to be important for this recommendation - committing resources to ensure that it has the capacity to deliver on its ambitions - and recommend keeping the outcomes of this under review.

SSDC was allocated £3.8M in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and is using this to deliver on its ambitions, building on areas which it is strong including growing businesses and supporting communities. For example, this will include a skills programme linked into local communities and businesses. The council has linked these priorities to that of its strategic partners to support the delivery within the District. An Assistant Director role will drive the UKSPF and its associated governance.

In the CPC report the peer team identified the need to consider SSDC's capacity needs. It is clear that the council has considered this and reviewed - bringing in additional capacity to deliver its priorities through the assistant directors roles.

The group discussed challenges being faced by councils in the current context and

that the appropriate consideration of risk will remain important. The group discussed how SSDC's approach is cautious and the council does not register anything in the MTFs which is not achievable. For example, there are some significant developments including West Midlands Interchange, Logic 54 and i54 where SSDC has a level of certainty on generating a good financial return in 2027. SSDC remains mindful of the challenges but remains in a relatively secure position currently with the business rates position.

Member and Officer working

The focus the council has on maintaining the positive working and relations between Members and officers continues - and this remains important to SSDC. Following the all-out elections in May 2023 there were 17 newly elected Members and together with an ongoing support programme all new Members met with the CEX and the Monitoring Officer (MO). The CEX and MO have also met with all 42 Members of SSDC to understand their ambitions and priorities for their term in office. Sessions have also included a discussion with CLT and Members to provide an overview of how the council operates and SSDC's priorities, and a wider Member session was held with the Extended Leadership Team and team managers to build relationships with all Members.

The council undertakes Ward Walks with a member of CLT and relevant ward Members to engage at a local level. These have emphasised the communities within the District and how communities relate strongly with their villages. Building on this SSDC will continue to build on these relationships for officers, Members and the wider community and groups to work together through its 'Community is the Best Medicine' Programme.

The peer team considered this approach to building relationships with new Members and officers to be further evidence of how SSDC is investing in the good, strong relationships observed during the CPC to deliver improved outcomes for communities.

Capacity and continuous improvement

The peer team heard how SSDC continues to focus on improvement, using the findings of the CPC to provide opportunities to support this. A good example of this is how SSDC has continued review itself as an 'employer of choice' and build on its offer. During the CPC the peer team acknowledged this was already a particularly strong area for the council, and heard how the council is extending its approach. The approach SSDC has taken is focused on attracting new staff as well as nurturing and retaining existing officers. SSDC has gathered together a range of measures to ensure it keeps an overview on this and this includes: analysing the regular staff surveys and wellbeing surveys; reviewing the outcomes of interviews, including the acceptance rate and number of vacancies not filled; considering how successful SSDC is at attracting interviewees - particularly in the harder to recruit to professions; and undertaking exit interviews. SSDC has also increased its focus on work experience students and made a pledge to provide an ongoing relationship following the placement to consider a career in local government and a future at SSDC. This has been developed since the CPC to build on its existing good practice. Staff surveys are well embedded and the council is now building up more comprehensive picture bringing together the above measures which has not been collated in this way previously before. The peer team consider this to be good practice in SSDC, as it is identifying how its use of this data can move it to the next level.

A CPC recommendation was to maintain the focus on SSDC's Evolution Programme. SSDC has been advancing its thinking and moving this forward, now discussing widely with staff. The 'One Team, One Council' remains important but the Programme will be built upon so that SSDC will be 'Small, Nimble and Connected': Small enough to care but big enough to make a difference; nimble enough to remain flexible to respond to the challenges quickly; and connected through the growing digital programme.

The peer team discussed how SSDC will remain focused on how to continually challenge itself and measure progress. CLT and Cabinet are currently developing

the council's priorities for the next 4 years and aligned to this is the importance of measuring the impact of its delivery. The peer team heard how SSDC has updated its place narrative and is shortly to undertake a second round of consultation, working with Members. The development of SSDC's 2024-2028 Council Plan will ensure the future focus of the organisation. To support this the council has developed four key measures so it will know it is delivering successfully:

1. **'Our residents tell us'** – 90% would recommend South Staffordshire as a place to live. SSDC recognises that this outcome is a combination of the council and other stakeholders, including the County Council and communities - but this will be good barometer for the place overall.
2. **'Our staff will tell us'** – 93% recommend the council as a place to work. The next staff survey will be issued in September. This measure is strongly linked to being an employer of choice and important to the council's workforce plans.
3. **'Our performance tells us'** – Consistently meeting Council Plan targets. These performance targets will be monitored by CLT and allows it to review and update, depending on the focus.
4. **'Our Peers tell us'** – This includes the outcome of the CPC. Additionally, in July 2023 SSDC hosted iESE and a number of other councils over 2 days for inter-organisational learning. SSDC shared its work on the community engagement programme, Community Hub and the locality business hubs. The council also sees the value of awards in raising its profile as an employer particularly for attracting new staff and retaining and motivating current staff but also as part of the check and challenge in comparing the council with other areas.

The group discussed how SSDC continues to challenge itself externally and the desire to not '*rest on its laurels*' was a theme picked up in the CPC. Since the CPC this external challenge and recognition has included: being awarded the Regional Planning Authority of the Year for the West Midlands by the Royal Town Planning Institute; shortlisted for the APSE Street Cleansing and Street scene Service; two SSDC apprentices shortlisted for IT & Digital Apprenticeship of the year award – City

of Wolverhampton College Apprenticeship Awards 2023 with one the eventual overall winner; and the CEX shortlisted for Municipal Journal Chief Executive of the Year.

However, SSDC remains mindful of the ongoing challenges. These include SSDC's Local Plan which has been paused until new national guidelines on housing numbers have been published; pressures from refugee schemes and housing demands; ongoing economic factors including inflation and the cost of living pressures; pressures facing contractors and their viability; and the external legislative challenges such as the Environment Act. CLT and Cabinet continue to discuss these to ensure the council is responding to challenges and putting mitigations in place where necessary.

5. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank SSDC 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.

Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is

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