


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

South Staffordshire District Council

5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> October 2022

Feedback report





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## 1. Executive summary

South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC) had its previous Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in 2018. Since this time there has been considerable change and challenge across the sector, including the Covid-19 pandemic, and SSDC itself has seen some significant changes such as a new Leader in 2021. This CPC has been commissioned at a time to support the council in the next stage of its journey and its desire to move to the 'next level'.

Through the CPC the peer team concluded that this is a very impressive council which is clearly focused on delivering for the communities of South Staffordshire. There is strong corporate leadership from Members and officers with good constructive councillor-councillor relationships in place. The visibility and accessibility of senior leaders is really appreciated by staff, who refer to the openness of the Leader and CEO as an important factor in fostering the open and collaborative ethos in how SSDC conducts its business.

There are some key projects which SSDC is rightly proud of and the peer team heard much about these within and outside of the council. Projects including the new Community Hub, i54 and Localities+ exemplify the council's ambitions and demonstrate what it can achieve. The depth of work with parish councils and the local three tier working arrangements are a real strength – and the council's approach of 'who's best placed to deliver' is key to what helps make this so successful. These examples also provide SSDC with the organisational confidence that it can deliver, and demonstrate the importance of its critical local role at the heart of improving the lives of its communities.

SSDC's partnership approach and convening role is recognised as being particularly strong. The council's active role in engaging constructively with others is valued and the peer team heard consistent feedback that SSDC is cited as amongst the best to work with by colleagues in other agencies.



The council's staff are recognised as a core asset and its focus on their support needs and development opportunities is appreciated by them. The peer team heard numerous examples where staff have been developed in their roles and how in turn this means SSDC can be effective in its response to communities. External partners noted how they believed that the council is at the forefront of workforce development and retention to meet the challenges facing the sector and is utilising different methods to address issues.

The peer team was impressed with SSDC's approach to collecting and managing third party data - particularly in relation to the profile of communities - and using this to shape services and respond to challenges with its partners. For instance, the pilot in Locality Three led by SSDC is utilising data and working with partners to target resources to the best effect. To continue making the most of this approach SSDC may want to consider how the use of its service-level data and customer feedback can be incorporated to help further deliver positive outcomes.

SSDC is delivering a number of critical activities, including the Customer Experience Improvement Programme. This is important for the organisation and will require resources to ensure it is delivered on time and on budget. The council will want to keep under review its capacity for this and other projects to ensure it can deliver the business as usual activity in parallel. This will include SSDC building on how it utilises potential additional resources to support specific projects.

SSDC's governance and processes serve it well. Members and officers understand their roles and responsibilities, and working arrangements ensure there is a good level of grip on the business of SSDC. The peer team consider there is an opportunity to further build on the visibility of Member/officer working in some areas, for instance in Scrutiny, where important discussions held prior to the formal meetings can speed up the session but does mean that work done outside the formal meeting is not captured and as obvious as it might be. SSDC may want to satisfy itself that arrangements are as effective as it would like them to be and that the important but less obvious work of committees is communicated as part of this



process.

SSDC is a well run council and has received external recognition most recently from iESE including 'UK Council of the Year 2022'. The council is rightly proud of this achievement and remains focused on ensuring ongoing improvement – with CLT keen to not “rest on its laurels”. The peer team congratulate the council in delivering some significant pieces of work over the past few years particularly during the pandemic and agree that the ‘next level’ for the council is now building on these steps made rather than a big leap. Building on what has been done and enhancing and refining this, ensuring that SSDC is consistently good at all levels of service delivery, will enable it to continue to meet its ambitions to reliably deliver good outcomes for the District and its communities.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team’s key recommendations to the council:

### **Recommendation 1**

Maintain the focus as set out in the council’s Evolution programme

### **Recommendation 2**

Develop a consistent approach to setting service standards, mapping customer journeys and measuring/evidencing satisfaction to support further improvement

### **Recommendation 3**

Implement the operational service level dashboard that has recently been developed to help ensure consistency and quality of service (consider investment in a software based system)

#### **Recommendation 4**

The council may want to review capacity for project delivery and ensure it maintains this to deliver business as usual activity, including considering additional resource to support specific projects

#### **Recommendation 5**

Customer Experience Improvement Programme: 1) website project - consider the council's capacity to deliver against the current timetable, and 2) ensure there is a collective vision and agreement of outcomes for the Programme and realistic timescales for delivery

#### **Recommendation 6**

The council needs to ensure a commercial approach is taken across the range of business as usual services, including contract management and income recovery

#### **Recommendation 7**

Capital schemes in the capital programme need to be profiled over the period of the MTFS to ensure accountability for delivery to allow regular monitoring of the capital programme


#### **Recommendation 8**

The council should consider setting up a comprehensive peer programme, visiting other councils to learn from them but also with a view to offer feedback to reciprocally improve services

### **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

#### **3.1. 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 were:


- Rob Mitchell (CEX) Charnwood Borough Council
- Cllr Duncan McGinty (Leader) Sedgemoor District Council
- Karen Edwards (Executive Director) Rushmoor Borough Council
- Peter Stachniewski (Finance Peer) LGA
- Frankie Stott (Programme Support Officer) LGA
- James Millington (Peer Challenge Manager) LGA

### **3.2. Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition, SSDC also asked the peer team to look at how the council can enhance and build upon the healthy culture of the organisation to shape and design services through the lens of its communities.



### **3.3. 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, things they saw 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. The team then spent two and a half days onsite at SSDC, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings onsite and virtually, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of council staff together with Members and external stakeholders.

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.




## 4. Feedback

### 4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

SSDC's Council Plan 2020-2024 clearly sets out the council's vision and priorities. This vision was shaped through the Place Narrative consultation with local people so that *Prosperous Communities* and *Vibrant Communities* could be delivered through: Financial Stability; Embracing Technology; Flexible and Skilled Council; Working with our Communities; and Create a Business and Community Hub. SSDC recognises the importance of working with others in partnership to deliver outcomes for its communities and this is clearly set out in the Plan as part of the approach. The peer team found that the Plan is well embedded in SSDC and it is clear that it is already looking further down the line and planning how to respond to future challenges.

SSDC is strong on its use of data and intelligence – and understands the profile and challenges of its communities through the use of third party information. The peer team heard how there was clear evidence of using this to align its own priorities and resources with those of partners and were particularly impressed with the Locality Three pilot and associated Action Plan. Although the council recognises that the District does not have widespread areas of deprivation, it does have 'hotspots' of deprivation, particularly in Locality Three. The intelligence shows higher levels of unemployment and benefit dependency, lower skills and educational attainment, poorer health, and higher crime levels. It is, therefore, a focus area for SSDC and it is leading work with its partners to respond to this.

SSDC had organised a mailed-out Resident Survey for 12 years using an external organisation but responding to lower return rates in 2020 reviewed its approach and brought this in-house, delivering it online. This resulted in the returns increasing from 524 in 2020 to 1,317 in 2021 – attracting more than twice as many responses. The results of the survey are an impressive indication of satisfaction with the place – with 92% of respondents recommending South Staffordshire as a place to live. SSDC is clearly keen to actively engage with its communities and to identify further ways in




which to do this, building on its existing approach. This includes looking to identify members of its community to help shape the approach to the Community Engagement Improvement Programme through the use of resident panels.

SSDC demonstrates its agility in responding to community needs and changing circumstances. There are some strong examples during the Covid-19 response including distributing more than £34.6M in Covid Business Grants to 1,950 businesses in South Staffordshire; supporting vulnerable members of the community by working closely with partners; and supporting the health and wellbeing of its own staff. The council is now leading work to respond to the cost of living crisis and has developed its own Cost of Living Council Support Checklist which ensures it has a whole council approach to support businesses and residents. It is also utilising its role delivering Parish Summits focused on Financial Resilience to bring people together and discuss the impact and practical support offers for its community.

An important feature of SSDC's approach to delivering outcomes is the Resource Planning and Prioritisation programme (RPP). This approach informs council budget decision making and ensures it aligns resources to priorities. For instance, the council made important decisions through this to protect funding for the voluntary and community sector and to allocate additional resources to refuse collection to allow separation of recyclable materials.

The Community Hub is an impressive example of how SSDC has brought partners together to realise the benefits of integration for the benefit of local communities. There are currently now 28 occupants of the Hub which includes partners across public, private, community, and NHS sectors. This is an excellent win-win example of how the council accommodation asset was transformed through £10M of investment, reconfigured the library and other services delivered from the building so they were much more customer facing, provided additional space for partners to move into the building, developed even closer working relationships with the council and each other, and increased council income from the building from £250K to £670K per year. This was good for SSDC finances, good for partners and the



communities, and a great example of the council getting multiple benefits through strong business planning and implementation. The peer team heard how there are opportunities for SSDC to build on these benefits further by engaging with the existing tenants on their current and future business requirements to ensure the Hub meets their operational and access needs. This is particularly relevant for the commercial tenants of the Hub and can help maximise the impact of this important local asset.

SSDC is focused on its role in addressing climate change. SSDC declared a Climate Emergency and has a Climate Change Strategy plan in place. This includes a Climate Festival and a youth climate committee. The new Local Plan is also being used as a key mechanism to encourage sustainable patterns of development, promote carbon resilient design, and protect the natural environment. SSDC is developing a strong programme of work in this area and is responding to the views of its communities through the Local Plan consultation process.

SSDC has plans to address demand and capacity issues in specific areas of the business including Benefits and Customer Services. The peer team encourage the council to follow through and continue to understand these types of challenges and respond with appropriate business cases and interventions as needed. Ensuring services are effective and that service standards are maintained is clearly of importance to the council and getting to the 'next level' will mean remaining on-top of this.

The peer team discussed the impact of government legislation on waste and disposal for the council. SSDC is aware of the issues and is currently reviewing its waste collection options. Given the timescales for procurement and vehicle lead-in times, the peer team emphasised that the council should be clear it has the time and capacity in place to implement a new contract by March 2025.


## 4.2. Organisational and place leadership

The Leader and CEO are seen as effective within the council and externally. SSDC staff appreciate the visibility and openness of senior leaders and feel engaged and focused on the objectives of the organisation. Staff therefore feel empowered to deliver and this helps when the council is encouraging them to respond to problems as they did in the case of the Covid-19 response.

The council provides good support and development opportunities for its staff including: Leadership mentoring; the Aspire Programme; apprenticeships across a range of council areas including Welfare & Customer Services and Digital Services; and a focus on staff wellbeing. The Aspire Programme is an example of an important part of the council's support offer and 31 staff have so far undertaken the Programme. It is tied in well to the corporate priorities of the organisation with participants focusing on developing solutions to corporate priorities; for instance in previous years this has focused on recruitment and retention, and this year on climate change.

SSDC is already working with South Staffordshire College and has also developed a practical apprentice and graduate development programme to be launched later this year to encourage school leavers to consider a career at the council – and this is a key recruitment and retention route for SSDC. The peer team heard from partners how the council's focus on recruitment and retention means that it is doing some creative work in this area. Staff too were very positive about the support and opportunities provided by SSDC and spoke about their satisfaction in being supported with their development and the positive implications of taking on more responsibility to deliver the priorities of the organisation. The peer team were very impressed with SSDC's approach and encourage it to maintain this momentum.

There are good communications internally and staff spoke about the importance of this in ensuring they were well informed and engaged. This includes: the yearly Big Thank You event; the CEO's weekly note and the CEO meeting with all new starters;



and the Team Manager engagement sessions, held every three weeks. The ‘open door’ policy and openness of the senior leadership team is recognised and appreciated. There is perhaps now an opportunity to develop staff networks and forums to provide further means to network across the organisation and for staff to support each other. In coming back from the Covid-19 experience, rebuilding some of those networks might be helpful for your staff and the business.

The council has a valuable approach to external communications set out in its Communications Strategy and has clear branding in place – with the council’s materials being clearly recognisable. SSDC has a good social media presence with around 9,500 followers which is constantly monitored to review the outreach. It also produces its own Review Magazine which it makes available online, with hard copies provided in selected venues. The latest issue provides a good overview of the council’s priority areas and covers the development of the logistics site, housing and the Local Plan review; the switch made to introducing separating paper and cardboard waste; investments in leisure services; climate change; and support to local businesses.

There are strong local partnership relationships in place and SSDC is central to the success of this. The effort the council makes in convening partners is recognised and appreciated and SSDC is seen as an important and proactive partner by the public, private, voluntary and community sector and parish partners which the peer team spoke to. The council do not wait for things to be presented to them and come with ideas and solutions and as such there was consistent feedback that SSDC is cited as amongst the best to work with by colleagues in other agencies.

There is an opportunity to continue to work closer with partners and build on the positive experiences. For example, this could include further work with Wolverhampton City Council to build on the positive experiences around i54, through regeneration and growth, and with Staffordshire County Council on the ‘single front door’. Partners are keen to build on the approach that is in place and with further exploration may also find that this could extend into service delivery and to areas




such as workforce.

SSDC has a vision for the future in its Evolution programme. This is an important facet of where the council wants to go next having made some improvements already. SSDC has outlined how over the next five years it will re-shape the design and delivery of service functions to support, engage, and empower all parts of the community. The ambition is to continue to build on the culture of SSDC and through the service Evolution programme the council outlines 'how, what and when' through four strands:

- Ways of Working – Capacity across the organisation
- Focused delivery areas – Improving links in priority areas in terms of service planning and design with communities. The priority areas are: Business partnership; Asset strategy; Localities+; Digital enablement; and Climate change
- Data and intelligence – Building on the use of locality data sets and intelligence
- Place Partnership – Expanding on SSDC's 'who's best placed to deliver' approach with partners.

The peer team agrees the approach which the council has set out is right for SSDC and encourages it to maintain the focus as set out in the programme. At the same time the council should also keep focused on the importance of business as usual services, and develop a consistent approach to service standards, mapping customer journeys and measuring/evidencing satisfaction levels. This is important to support SSDC's clear desire for continuous improvement and ensure key services are delivering outcomes to the level which the council desires.

Following the CPC in 2018 SSDC developed its first Place Narrative through wide engagement with the local community. This has been a useful exercise for the council with feedback also informing the Council Plan 2022-24. SSDC has plans to refresh this Place Narrative following the election in May 2023, again undertaking a




consultation process. The peer team see this as a strength of the council in reviewing and refreshing its approach and vision at appropriate stages.

Business engagement is strong and a real feature is the connection with businesses in different sectors and business support. A good example of the council's work in building on opportunities is the Business Place Partnership, with more than 80 members, which built on the experience of getting closer to local business during the Covid-19 pandemic and the council's 10-point Plan for supporting local businesses. The Business Place Partnership 'hubs', focused on particular services, is an interesting idea and the peer team heard about the work the council did with local businesses to engage with local school aged children on the potential for careers in hospitality in the South Staffordshire area. There is an opportunity to do more here and the peer team would encourage SSDC to continue to use its partnership approach to make the most of the significant business assets it has within and close to the District.

The established Localities+ programme which holds bi-monthly forums with Members from the county, district and parishes and has put in place Local Enablers - staff with responsibility in specific localities - is a strong feature of the council's locality approach. The ambitions of the Locality Three pilot are impressive and include utilising data and working with partners to target resources. To continue making the most of this approach, SSDC may want to consider how the use of its service-level data and feedback can be incorporated to help further delivery of outcomes.

### **4.3. Governance and Culture**

It is clear that SSDC is reflective and open to learning and requesting this CPC is indicative of the ethos of the organisation. The recommendations from the CPC in 2018 were responded to and the council has also taken advantage of the LGA's Recovery Panel in 2020 to reflect on its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is extremely positive and the council will want to further refine its approach in



developing its own practice, as well as seeking out good practice to build into council operations for the benefit of its communities.


The Leader has been in place since 2021 and the peer team heard good feedback on his approach and commitment to getting the most for the District. Cabinet Members demonstrate good knowledge and are experienced with a good grasp of their portfolios and priorities.

The peer team observed a strong organisational culture with the council operating to its values of “respect, trust and transparency” and that the “One Team, One Council” approach remains well embedded – as identified during the CPC in 2018. There are good relationships between Members and officers and Member-Member at the council. Both council staff and Members spoke positively of these values across SSDC and that the council itself is approachable, listens and acts.

There was evidence of a good commercial ethos being developed across the organisation. The peer team acknowledge that the council is making progress in this area and agree that there remains further work to embed this across the whole council. Whilst it is clear that the council is operating more commercially, around tenancies and agreements on direct debits, and has made large strides forward through the Community Hub, the next level may be about consolidating progress and making incremental improvements across the council, including in service delivery processes.

The council was subject to a Boundary Review in 2021 with the outcome of a reduction of councillors from 49 to 42 and a reduction of wards from 25 to 20. In its submission as part of this Review SSDC provided a cross-party submission, demonstrating effective cross-party working and this was recognised positively by the Boundary Commission.






The council is in the process of preparing its new Local Plan and is on track for completion in December 2023. This includes a wide consultation with residents (more than 2,600 responses received) and Members through engagement and workshop sessions. This is important for the council given the balance between protecting the feel of the district at the same time as supporting growth and its future ambitions. SSDC will need to ensure it maintains close attention throughout this process and balances competing demands as it moves towards the adoption of the Plan.

The peer team felt that SSDC governance is strong in key areas with processes in place meaning there is effective oversight of council business. This is through the external committee structures and internal governance arrangements for projects and programmes.

The peer team heard how Scrutiny is playing an important role at the council but SSDC could consider how to make its work increasingly visible to appreciate the contribution that it does make. As an example, as part of the budget setting process Scrutiny is fully engaged in discussions but this is not immediately clear due to the lack of detailing of discussions. The peer team know it makes a valuable contribution but SSDC may want to consider if more could be done to recognise this.

SSDC has a Member Engagement Training Group which meets regularly to discuss the development needs of councillors and has a Member Development Programme in place. Internal support is provided to Members as well as external support including through the LGA, for example, covering Personal Safety, and Chairing Skills. SSDC is also keen on attracting people across its community to consider standing for election as councillors. With the LGA it has hosted Be A Councillor events in January 2019 ahead of the 2019 elections and in Oct 2022 ahead of the May 2023 elections. This approach by SSDC to encourage a diverse group of individuals to stand for election, and then prioritise their ongoing support and 'councillor career' is a good approach which the peer team support the council maintaining its focus on.




SSDC is considering the effectiveness of the existing quarterly reporting process as part of the Evolution programme to ensure that it is providing the level of information required for the business. The peer team recognise that the council has plans in place for this but it is important to maintain a focus on this and consider how service-level performance and customer feedback can be at the heart of this. Getting this right will help the council to maintain oversight of its services and areas for improvement. The benefits of an IT based system, such as Pentana or similar, may also be helpful to consider as part of this.

#### **4.4. Financial planning and management**

The council has strong financial management and this is reflected in both its financial reporting and level of reserves. The peer team observed good awareness of the financial position by Members and that financial reporting to Members through Integrated Performance Management (IPM) reports is supported by the use of timely data to ensure effective budget management. This information seems appropriate for Member needs for the level of oversight and detail required. In addition, Grant Thornton (GT), the external auditors, were complimentary about the quality of the 2020/21 accounts which were completed within the statutory deadline and supported by good working papers.


The level of reserves provides SSDC with financial resilience which will help it address current and future financial pressures. However, the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), which is updated each year and covers a period of 5 years, sets out the financial challenges that the council faces. The latest MTFS, covering the period 2022/23 to 2026/27, showed a budget deficit in each year of the plan with reserves being depleted over the period. This was presented to Members alongside the 2022/23 budget papers and, at the time, the council's director of finance reported that more work needed to be done for the council to be financially secure in the medium term. Whilst in previous years, the council has underspent against its budget allowing it to increase its reserves, this has been driven from a



combination of timely decision making and more favourable budget assumptions which has mitigated some pressures and allowed it to increase its reserves. This cannot be depended upon and the impact of rising inflation since the 2022/23 budget was agreed, together with continuing uncertainty about future funding for local government, makes it all the more important that the council finds ways of reducing dependence on planned use of reserves to balance its budget in future years. GT found, in their report on the 2020/21 accounts, that the council had proper arrangements in place to deliver economy, efficiency and effectiveness and the peer team observed a pro-active approach by the council to improving the cost effectiveness of services which will be needed to address the future budget gap. There is strong leadership of the finance function, supported by collective ownership of financial issues by the council-wide Member and officer leadership, and the peer team believes this should help guide the council through any choppy financial waters ahead.

An important feature of SSDC's approach to finance and delivering outcomes is the Resource Planning and Prioritisation (RPP) process. This approach informs council budget decision making and ensures it aligns resources to priorities. The peer team heard about good engagement with Members and officers through this process which ensures that council resources are targeted toward its agreed priority areas. To enhance this further SSDC may want to look at ways of increasing community involvement in the RPP process so there is wider public/partner understanding of the resource prioritisation choices the council has to make. This may link well with the aims of the Evolution programme and provide further understanding of the choices which may need to be made in future.

The council's commercial ethos has helped it achieve a good return on commercial investments. As highlighted already this includes the Community Hub, and additionally other projects including the Four Ashes Enterprise Park (creating 18 new small business units) and the redevelopment of Wombourne Enterprise Park. SSDC has been actively working to ensure the council is financially sustainable whilst at the same time addressing the needs of local business and communities. The council will



want to ensure that a commercial approach is taken across the range of business as usual services, including contract management and income recovery. Work is being done on this already ensuring a focus on this will help the council push towards the next stage of its commercial agenda.


SSDC has some significant capital schemes in its programme and to improve its approach the peer team recommend profiling this over the period of the MTFS. This will ensure accountability for delivery and through the regular monitoring of the capital programme will provide enhanced oversight and early indications of issues.

The council has a good understanding of its financial risks and manages these as part of its corporate approach to risk management. Risks are similar to that of other councils and include: the Economic Climate; Brexit Changes and Pandemic recovery; Cyber Security; Legislation (including the Environment Act); Fairer Funding Review; Business Rates Retention and New Homes Bonus. The peer team consider the approach to be robust and well managed with risks rated in the council's Strategic and Operational risk register and are monitored through the Integrated Performance Management (IPM). There is a high awareness of the importance of finance and risk within the council and staff the peer team met talked about the importance of being financially savvy and that finance 'was everyone's business'

An effective Audit and Risk Committee which has oversight of financial governance is important. The council may wish to review how this may be strengthened further and how further support can be made available, for example through the LGA's West Midlands Chairs of Audit Forum to ensure that the Committee has all that it needs to continue to be effective.

#### **4.5. Capacity for improvement**

SSDC has developed an organisational culture which supports the improvement of the council. Agility amongst staff and services in moving resources to need across




the organisation and adapting roles - e.g. the role of Community Enablers within the Localities - is a key strength. The council is good at identifying talent and matching it with opportunities for taking on projects in areas of interest for instance in the Community Hub, Commercial Enterprise Estates and reviewing leases and updating tenant data projects. This helps to grow council staff and also allows the organisation to meet some of the challenges it is facing. The peer team heard from staff that they are pleased to be able to do this and take on additional responsibilities which support council delivery. We heard many examples of where staff had been willing and able to do this and there is a high level of staff satisfaction and pride. This puts SSDC in a good position for the future.

Development of in-house talent needs to be supported by effective recruitment of external talent. Recruitment and retention has been recognised as a priority and changes have been made including new incentives, and improvements to the recruitment and onboarding system. The council is well placed to offer incentives to work for SSDC and will need to ensure it is able to use this to compete with other employers. The foundations it is laying to be an Employer of Choice are sound and will need to be consistently reviewed to ensure they are having the desired impact.

The council has been adept at knowing when to bring in expertise when it needs it – recognising that looking outside of the organisation is important. This has included a willingness to use earmarked reserves to support the capacity of the organisation and also bringing in expertise from external specialists in areas such as organisational development and recruiting and retaining talented staff. Continuing to recognise when and how to do this will be important and the relationships SSDC has built up and maintained with local groups and partners and their willingness to support the council will be key.

Regardless of the efforts the council makes to develop and attract talent, there are some areas where recruitment and retention issues are particularly acute. One such is Elections where the sector as a whole is currently facing problems sourcing experienced staff. The council is aware of, and mitigating against, the risks in its own



current position, but the peer team underline the importance of ensuring this is kept under review throughout the period up to the elections in May 2023.

Alongside this SSDC may want to review capacity for project delivery whilst maintaining its business as usual activity. We did hear from some staff that demand on their time is growing, including around cost of living where there has been an impact on areas such as Welfare Advice. Another example of this is the Customer Experience Improvement Programme which is a critical transformation piece for SSDC. The council will need to ensure there is a collective vision and agreement of outcomes for the Programme and realistic timescales for delivery to ensure that the council's capacity to deliver against the current timetable is achievable. The council will have to manage the potential for conflicting priorities between these important areas of work and the need to ensure effective delivery of core services.

The peer team heard how SSDC is consistently cited as a great partner. Leveraging partnership capacity against local and system-wide issues – for example in Locality Three – will be a big test of the outcomes which can be achieved when addressing some of the more difficult issues which the District's residents are facing. SSDC has invested time in this approach and the peer team is interested in seeing the results.

The council has a lot to offer to the sector on its journey so far and its plans for the future. Building on its own approach to learning and improvement a peer learning programme with other councils – which could include visits - could be a means of sharing good practice from SSDC with other areas and also bringing learning back to support the delivery of the outcomes of services at the council. The LGA would be happy to work alongside the council to support this.



## **How can the council enhance and build upon the healthy culture of the organisation to shape and design services through the lens of its communities?**

In addition to the 5 core areas of every CPC, the council asked that the peer team look at how the council can enhance and build upon the healthy culture of the organisation to shape and design services through the lens of its communities. There are reflections on this within the report but the peer team do think there is an opportunity to develop community panels further, using the council's reach into the localities where there are already good connections. These panels comprising of members of SSDC's communities could be engaged to co-design services. The council is already planning to do this as part of the Community Engagement Improvement Programme and website project so this could be used as a test to roll-out further.

Given the nature of the geography of the District, SSDC may also want to consider the approaches for increasing community capacity in certain areas. This may include strength-based approaches, for instance to addressing loneliness and again be a test bed to consider expanding further in other areas too.

The 'who's is best placed to deliver' ethos is a strong positive feature of the council and there may be opportunities to explore this further irrespective of remit, e.g. furthering work on the single front door pilot with the County Council and continuing to work with Parishes following the Financial Sustainability Summits.

There is an opportunity to continue to engage with communities and customers with a focus on service standards and expectations. The expectations from customers on speed of delivery and level of response has grown and can be difficult for organisations to consistently manage. Further engagement with the community on what SSDC delivers, given the resource challenges, could be key to managing expectations and also an opportunity to ensure services are designed from the point of the customer experience.



## 5. 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 LGA. Helen is available to discuss any further support the council requires [Helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.murray@local.gov.uk).