

# Doncaster Council Corporate Peer Challenge

16<sup>th</sup> May – 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Feedback from the peer challenge team

Date of presentation: 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022

# The peer challenge team

- **Professor Steven Broomhead, MBE** (Chief Executive - Warrington Borough Council)
- **Councillor Shabir Pandor** (Leader - Kirklees Council)
- **Stephen Young** (Chief Executive - Halton Borough Council)
- **Christina Thompson** (Director of Finance and Property - London Borough of Lambeth)
- **Helen Reeves** (Programme Manager - LGA)
- **Satvinder Rana** (Programme Manager - LGA)

# The purpose of peer challenge

Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet a council's needs.

They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.

The peers 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 team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

# The process of peer challenge

- Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future
- The peer team gathered information and views from more than 35 meetings, in addition to further research
- We spoke to around 120 people including a range of council staff together with Members and external stakeholders

# Scope and brief for the peer challenge

We have considered the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges, namely:

1. Local priorities and outcomes
2. Organisational and place leadership
3. Governance and culture
4. Financial planning and management
5. Capacity for improvement

# Scope and brief for the peer challenge

Also considered the following area of focus:

- i. What more needs to be done to build leadership, management and workforce capacity to deliver Doncaster Delivering Together (DDT)?*
- ii. What more needs to be done to communicate and embed the DDT priorities – in the Council, across Team Doncaster and in communities?*
- iii. What more can be done to strengthen the Council's approach to securing additional investment, developing delivery plans and implementing them?*
- iv. What further critical success factors, risks and opportunities need to be considered in rolling out localities working?*
- v. How the Council's risk management culture and arrangements need to evolve to deliver the DDT priorities?*

# Overall messages and observations

- Doncaster is on a journey of continuous improvement with many good features, and if continued will be an exemplar council
- The Council is enterprising, seeks opportunities and delivers well for place with a developing focus on people
- Staff and partners are hugely committed to delivering for Doncaster. However there is a need to pause and reflect on the Council's strategies to address organisational overload and fatigue
- Simplify and communicate key messages in a more tailored manner
- There is an opportunity to slightly increase the corporate risk appetite and to be bolder in a managed way

# Overall messages and observations

- The impact of the cost of living crisis on local communities and the delivery of council services will be a major issue for the Council to think about and respond to
- With the developing localities working there may be an opportunity to further devolve budgets and decision making to localities



# Local priorities and outcomes

- The Council has a compelling vision and clear priorities to deliver its ambitions for Doncaster
- There is high level of understanding and buy-in to the Council's ambitions and priorities within the organisation and among strategic partners
- There is pride and a strong sense of place and identity among Members and staff; and they understand their role and responsibilities in place-shaping and improving the lives of local people
- There is also recognition that Doncaster is a 'Place of Places' consisting of areas with different needs which increasingly the Council is focused on
- The Council has made a strong start to delivering on its ambitions and will need to prioritise to maximise opportunities, particularly regeneration of local areas e.g. Stainforth, Edlington and Mexborough

# Local priorities and outcomes

- Address the perception that regeneration opportunities and delivery are Doncaster town centre focused. Communicate the ripple effect of this investments to other areas
- Whilst the strategic planning is informed by good external thinking, it is important to decipher some of the key messages into simplified language and communicate in a more tailored manner
- Work needs to be done to ensure that staff and partners at all levels understand the vision and priorities as they apply to them

# Organisational and place leadership

- Very strong political and managerial leadership provided by the Mayor and Chief Executive, who are very well regarded and valued both internally and externally
- The balance between political and external leadership provided by the Mayor and the managerial and organisational leadership provided by the Chief Executive are major strengths
- There are very strong partner relationships in place. Partners are well engaged and aligned to the Council's ambitions and priorities
- Partnerships are driven by shared values and pragmatism
- There is an excellent record of attracting external funding and civic entrepreneurship e.g. Town Deal, Levelling Up funding, private sector investments, etc.

# Organisational and place leadership

- There is very visible commitment to collaborative leadership in Doncaster and this is being demonstrated through stakeholder engagement in developing and delivering the Council's priorities
- Strong foundations for ICS/ICP change agenda have been built on good relations with NHS/CCG/Health Providers
- There is an opportunity to re-evaluate the relationship with Parish and Town Councils and bring them on-board through a co-designed and co-produced framework for future engagement to align with the new localities strategy
- There is an opportunity to further engage frontline Members and strengthen cross-party working at local levels through the localities working approach.

# Organisational and place leadership

- The Councillor casework system could benefit from further embedding so all Members are utilising it productively
- Public Health is well embedded and aligned to the community regeneration planning and delivery framework and is starting to make a positive difference to the challenges of health inequalities post pandemic

# Governance and culture

- Doncaster Council is a well run Council with strong, robust and transparent governance and decision making arrangements in place
- Overview and Scrutiny works well and is supported within the Council. Organisational challenge on specific policy areas is provided through scrutiny panels
- Audit Committee works well and is effective. It provides the appropriate challenge and assurance
- Further develop a culture of continuous reflection and realistic organisational critique
- Clear strategic risk management arrangements are in place and the time is right to reassess, with Members, the organisation's risk appetite
- Member and officer relationships are strong, supportive and productive

# Governance and culture

- There is an abundance of energy and enthusiasm in the organisation and this is supported by a strong and positive ‘can-do and will deliver’ organisational culture
- People have a strong affinity to the ‘Place of Places’ and they want to do the best they can for the Borough and local communities
- Good Member and staff training and development is in place and this is supported by a Member Development Programme and a Leadership and Management Development Framework

# Financial planning and management

- The Council is financially secure and has largely delivered its efficiency savings
- There is a proactive and anticipatory approach to financial planning that is backed up with good governance arrangements
- Care Funding, increased academisation of schools, the Fair Funding Review, Business Rates reset and rapid inflation will present future financial challenges/risks to the Council, but these are acknowledged and are being planned for
- The transfer of Children's Trust into the Council and its associated risks are understood and will require continued detailed attention



# Financial planning and management

- Ward budgets are in place, they are hugely valued by frontline Members and are starting to have positive impacts on localities
- The Council has a good record of attracting external funding and investing on its priorities. Going forward, the Council should consider how best it can use this external funding to leverage additional private sector investments
- This may mean taking a degree of risk to seed fund future council investment proposals by weighing up social value returns as well as financial returns – the culture and practice of the Council should allow this to happen

# Capacity to deliver and improve

- The Council has made a good start to delivering its ambitions. However, it has been disrupted by floods, wildfire, COVID, and now by the energy and cost of living crises
- This, together with a renewed emphasis on the concept of the 'Regenerative Council', is giving rise to organisational fatigue and overload resulting in a strain on capacity. Clear mitigation measures need to be developed
- The Council should pause and reflect on the development of strategies and consolidate what it already has in place to achieve the outcomes through clear implementation plans and annual delivery targets that are understood by all staff and partners
- Part of the journey of continuous improvement will be about identifying services and projects that can be concluded

# Capacity to deliver and improve

- The Council's hybrid-working plans need to be supported by clear management and staff guidance on how this will work in practice for the whole workforce
- There are widespread issues with recruitment and retention, especially around key skills, and these need to be recognised through renewed workforce planning
- In view of national pay negotiations, recruitment and retention, and other HR issues it will require the Council to reset its relationship, consultation and communication arrangements with the Trade Unions

## Additional areas of focus

- ***What more needs to be done to build leadership, management and workforce capacity to deliver Doncaster Delivering Together (DDT)?***

Invest in training, development and effective team working at senior officer levels; develop workforce resilience including consideration of organisational fatigue and recruitment challenges

- ***What more needs to be done to communicate and embed the DDT priorities – in the Council, across Team Doncaster and in communities?***

Simplification of the language in communicating and the targeting of key messages. Recognition of digital exclusion for some members of communities

## Additional areas of focus

- ***What more can be done to strengthen the Council's approach to securing additional investment, developing delivery plans and implementing them?***

Managed increase in risk appetite and the development of clear and focused delivery plans

- ***What further critical success factors, risks and opportunities need to be considered in rolling out localities working?***

Simple evidence that shows what positive difference localities working is making to local communities; communities and Ward Councillors will need to see tangible impact

## Additional areas of focus

- ***How the Council's risk management culture and arrangements need to evolve to deliver the DDT priorities?***

Take the opportunity to reassess corporate risk appetite

# Recommendations

1. Pause and reflect on the Council's strategies to address organisational overload and fatigue; and address capacity issues
2. Condense the key priorities for the Council for the next three years and set annual delivery targets
3. Simplify and communicate key messages in a more tailored manner, particularly internally
4. Reassess the Council's corporate risk appetite
5. Continue to plan for the impact of the cost of living crisis on local communities and the delivery of council services
6. Celebrate the Council's achievements and consider sharing learning and good practice with the wider local government sector

## Next steps

- Opportunity for questions and discussion now
- Public feedback report to follow shortly
- Council to publish an action plan in response within eight weeks of the CPC report's publication
- 6-month check-in to be scheduled – an opportunity to discuss progress and next steps