

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough
Council

21st December 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 5th – 8th June 2023 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately six-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 Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council took place on 21st December 2023.

The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge as follows:

Recommendation 1

Celebrate the council's achievements!

There is a lot to be proud of in Rotherham. The council has undergone an impressive transformation and has many exemplary and commendable practices that other councils can learn from. These, as well as the external validations the council has received, should be more actively profiled and celebrated widely.

Recommendation 2

Develop an externally facing compelling and positive narrative of place which will help to promote and market the borough and capitalise on Rotherham's assets.

A strong, consistent and compelling outward focusing story about Rotherham told over and over again will help to market the borough, promote the place and its assets and inject confidence to attract inward investment as well as change perceptions of the town as a great place to live, work and visit.

Recommendation 3

Use the significant investments underway to expand and attract private sector investment at scale, maximising its potential and supporting a more inclusive economic future.

By diversifying investment sources, the council can not only mitigate the risk of a decline in activity if public funds were to diminish but also foster the growth of a more inclusive and mixed economy, thereby ensuring long-term sustainability for the borough.

Recommendation 4

Develop effective pathways and mechanisms for local people, especially young people, to benefit from inclusive growth that can help to deliver improved health outcomes and address inequalities.

Facilitating local people to connect into growth opportunities through clear pathways to new skills, jobs and business opportunities will ensure that economic growth is inclusive and brings tangible social value.

Recommendation 5

Review performance management with a focus on demonstrating impact and an improvement in outcomes in delivering the council's ambition; and use the strong leadership, capacity and capability of the top-team to drive and deliver further organisational transformations and change across the borough at pace.

Streamline performance management and continue to work with scrutiny to ensure that the process of taking items to scrutiny before they reach Cabinet does not slow down decision-making. Furthermore, maximising the potential of the top-team to take

on greater levels of corporate responsibility can drive and deliver future change and transformations at pace, whilst maintaining the strong foundations and good governance that has been put in place.

Recommendation 6

Building on the Neighbourhood working model, develop a clearer and shared understanding of integrated locality working across the public sector and increase the pace of digital transformation across the organisation to deliver improved outcomes for residents and consistently improve the customer experience.

This will help to further modernise the organisation and improve efficiency and effectiveness. Digital transformation should lead to the discontinuing of parallel paper-based processes to avoid duplication, increase efficiency and improve the customer experience. Integrated locality working through increased co-design and co-production of solutions and services alongside partner organisations can deliver enhanced outcomes for residents through improved services and solutions which are tailored to their needs.

Recommendation 7

Continue to keep the medium-term financial strategy under review - testing assumptions and undertaking sensitivity analysis – and continue to report to Members on a regular basis.

Using scenario planning and reviewing the medium-term financial strategy helps to identify options when there are uncertainties over future funding arrangements and volatility in the economy. This will enable the council to stress test demand-led budgets and assess risks to fully understand and reflect the impact of variables going forward. Continuing to keep Members updated on the fiscal health of the organisation and associated risks will ensure they maintain a strong grip on the budget.

For this progress review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- **Denise Park** (Chief Executive - Blackburn with Darwen Council)
- **Councillor Eamonn O'Brien** (Leader - Bury Council)
- **Dame Mary Ney** (LGA Associate and former Government Commissioner at

Rotherham MBC)

- **Richard Roe** (Corporate Director for Place - Trafford Council)
- **Satvinder Rana** (Senior Regional Adviser - LGA)

The peer team met face to face in Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council over the course of one day with the following representatives from the council:

- **Sharon Kemp** – Chief Executive, Rotherham MBC
- **Councillor Chris Read** – Leader, Rotherham MBC
- **Judith Badger** - Strategic Director of Finance and Customer Services, Rotherham MBC
- **Paul Woodcock** - Strategic Director Regeneration and Environment, Rotherham MBC
- **Jo Brown** - Assistant Chief Executive, Rotherham MBC
- Cabinet and the Strategic Leadership Team
- Opposition Members
- Focus group with managers and officers involved in the delivery of the actions in the plan

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The council's leadership briefed the peer team about the work it has been doing and the context within which it has been operating since the peer challenge. For example, in October 2023 Rotherham experienced severe flooding during Storm Babet. The council, together with the emergency services, evacuated 120 homes in the area and set up emergency accommodation and hotels for those impacted most by the flooding. This was followed by the necessary and ongoing support to residents affected to help them resettle back into their homes.

The peer team was pleased to see the positive and engaging way in which the council addressed the recommendations of the Corporate Peer Challenge of June 2023, the actions it has taken so far, and the evidence provided to show the progress being made.

The council developed and published an action plan in September 2023 in response

to the recommendations of the Corporate Peer Challenge and has been delivering against this. The peer team was impressed with the progress made so far and would encourage the council to continue its delivery whilst ensuring that it is measuring the impacts of its efforts.

Recommendation 1

Celebrate the council's achievements!

The council has been celebrating its achievements and using these to motivate and inspire staff to do more.

Over the last six months the council has been promoting the ambitious regeneration of the borough, celebrated reaching the halfway point in creating 1,000 new council homes, its culture and heritage offer, and its plans to connect Rotherham back to the mainline railway.

There was also a double page spread in the Municipal Journal in October 2023 on the changes that have taken place in Rotherham from a council in intervention less than 10 years ago to where it is now. This carried interviews with the Chief Executive and the Leader who shared the council's improvement journey and the impact that has had on the organisation and the town.

The council is continuing to promote the borough using residents' and stakeholder voices to amplify the work the council is doing to improve lives, bring in investment and create a place where people are proud to belong, and showcasing its approach within a new corporate communications strategy.

Since the agreement of the council's action plan in September 2023, the council has held staff events to share the findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge and the activity the council is undertaking in response to these. Other celebratory events that have taken place include the council's annual awards to celebrate staff achievements in 2023, as well as the twice-yearly Rotherham Together Partnership showcase event to celebrate achievements of key milestones in the Rotherham Plan. The next 'Working together for Rotherham' leaflet drop to all households across the borough is planned to promote partnership successes and achievements to residents in early 2024.

The council took a progress report to Cabinet in January 2024 outlining the progress

in delivering the Council Plan and Year Ahead Delivery Plan for 2023-24, which will be used to story-tell and promote the work of the council, using case studies and residents' lived experiences as the narrative to showcase achievements. A forward plan has also been established to capture service activity across the organisation to provide oversight of all activity, events, milestones and good news activities.

The peer team was pleased to see the council publicly acknowledging and celebrating its achievements and improvement journey. Its plans for the future, including the development of a new corporate communications strategy, are robust. Its strategy to use storytelling to promote the work of the council, using case studies and residents' lived experiences, is a great way to celebrate achievements and the peer team would encourage the council to continue doing this.

Recommendation 2

Develop an externally facing compelling and positive narrative of place which will help to promote and market the borough and capitalise on Rotherham's assets.

The council held a 'Promoting Rotherham' workshop with partners in November 2023 to provide an opportunity to discuss and consider how to market the borough to a range of stakeholders including residents, potential investors and government. Collectively, partners are now working together to develop an updated 'Rotherham Story' to market the borough, supported by a clear action plan.

Plans are underway to restructure the Rotherham Investment and Development Office (RIDO) to strengthen its focus on economic development and provide additional skills and capabilities. Phase 1 of the restructure was implemented in September 2023, creating a new Head of Economic Development. Phase 2 commenced in November 2023 and the restructure is scheduled to be completed by February 2024.

Furthermore, an Inward Investment Plan is being developed which includes engaging with partners to complete an assessment of economic strengths and creating a compelling investment proposition that clearly articulates the benefits of locating, expanding or investing capital in Rotherham.

Engagement is also underway with the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) to prepare an evidence base for a 'prospectus for growth', building on the

work they are undertaking to develop a new South Yorkshire Plan for Growth. This work will consider and further develop the Investment Zone intervention package to be submitted to Government by SYMCA. Other joint projects include the development of a new Local Visitor Economy Partnership and a Destination Management Plan for South Yorkshire.

These are solid interventions to help define, promote and market the borough and should lead to a compelling and positive narrative of place that paints a clear picture of where Rotherham, as a borough and a place, is heading.

Recommendation 3

Use the significant investments underway to expand and attract private sector investment at scale, maximising its potential and supporting a more inclusive economic future.

The council is focused on completing the delivery of regeneration projects in the town centre and across the borough including Forge Island, Rotherham Markets and Library, Riverside Gardens, Town Deal Programme, Levelling-Up Fund Programme, and the Towns and Villages programme. All these projects are progressing in line with individual project plans and the council is working on developing a pipeline of investment planning proposals including future town centre regeneration, a new Mainline Station and an Investment Zone (Rotherham - Sheffield Corridor). Feasibility funding has been secured to align funding for the development of future regeneration and economic development projects. Master-planning work is also underway for the Mainline Station area, and engagement is taking place with SYMCA on the development of interventions for the Investment Zone.

Going forward, the council is investigating opportunities to establish joint ventures and partnerships with the private sector that provide access to private expertise, brand equity and additional capital in return for balanced risk and reward; and developing future pipeline for housing growth to maximise benefits of housing development and improve the council's ability to access national and regional funding. The council is participating in the SYMCA/Homes England Pipeline Project which aims to identify the top 20 housing sites and understand barriers to development and potential funding needs.

The peer team was pleased with the work the council has done to successfully attract

public sector funding and its plans to use this as seed funding to attract private sector investment. This work should continue as the future prosperity of the borough through a more inclusive and mixed economy will be dependent on attracting private sector investment - be bold, ambitious and confident in pursuing these opportunities.

Recommendation 4

Develop effective pathways and mechanisms for local people, especially young people, to benefit from inclusive growth that can help to deliver improved health outcomes and address inequalities.

The council is establishing an inclusive employment workstream and programme structure which will provide strategic and operational direction for the employment workstream in the council's delivery of an inclusive economy. An operational group has been established for the workstream and a mapping exercise regarding services offered has been completed, with funding timelines and risks identified.

In addition, Century II Business Incubation Centre has opened providing space for new start businesses and local growth and employment opportunities. Advisory services have been embedded within the business hubs to connect clients to local support such as Advance, the Enterprise Adviser Network and Business Education Alliance. This work will build on existing links between the business centres and the council's wider programme of employment and skills support.

The council recognises the need for coherent pathways for the people of Rotherham to seek support in identifying and gaining meaningful employment. It has also agreed the need for a 'dashboard' showing areas of activity and performance measures. The council is also working with Rotherham Together Partners to deliver its social value and real living wage ambitions.

This is a complex and challenging area of work where the council, together with its strategic partners (including investors), will need to put in place greater strategic interventions around skills and employment to improve market accessibility and mobility for the local working age population i.e. a comprehensive infrastructure of employment support that complements national employment programmes. This will be critical in ensuring 'fair growth' and a prosperous borough for all.

Recommendation 5

Review performance management with a focus on demonstrating impact and an improvement in outcomes in delivering the council's ambition; and use the strong leadership, capacity and capability of the top-team to drive and deliver further organisational transformations and change across the borough at pace.

The council is commencing the process of developing a new Council Plan and a refreshed outcomes focused Performance Management Framework for 2025. The peer team would encourage the council to ensure that its refreshed performance framework maintains the delivery of three main objectives i.e. provides adequate and timely management information and data to drive service improvements, provides adequate and timely information to Members on progress against the council's strategic ambitions to assist in policy development, and provides adequate and timely information in an easy to digest format to the public on outcomes achieved and the impact made against the council's priorities.

The council has widened distribution of the roles of the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) with regards to the Big Hearts Big Challenges delivery programme where members of SLT have taken on greater levels of responsibility to assist in leading the programme. The council has also embedded an Assistant Directors' Group to effectively drive forward operational management of the council and the delivery of the council plan.

The peer team met with an impressive cohort of key managers and officers including assistant directors and heads of service who showed great potential and appetite for corporate and cross council working. This should be further encouraged via the structures and processes the council has put in place for the working of the cohort. They were on message and clear about the ambitions of the council and the challenges in delivering them and demonstrated enthusiasm in working up shared solutions going forward.

Recommendation 6

Building on the Neighbourhood working model, develop a clearer and shared understanding of integrated locality working across the public sector and increase the pace of digital transformation across the organisation to deliver improved outcomes for residents and consistently improve the customer experience.

The council is establishing a Place-based working project board to oversee the continued development of the council's Neighbourhood working model and approach to place-based working, that takes account of the Council Plan and ward priorities. It is also implementing proposals to:

- Improve the effectiveness of the structures set up to tackle community safety, crime and anti-social behaviour across wards and locality areas
- Ensure the roll out of Family Hubs is integrated into wider neighbourhood/locality working
- Provide opportunities to promote early intervention and prevention and tackle health inequalities across neighbourhoods and localities

In addition, the council has put in place a Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan to ensure that every resident in Rotherham is able to enjoy the benefits of getting online and is able to conduct its interactions with the council such as reporting potholes, booking leisure facilities, etc. Work is continuing to identify further processes that can be digitised and developed to bring about transformation across the organisation.

Further work in developing joint solutions at neighbourhood/locality level with public sector partners will help to deliver more seamless and integrated solutions to residents. This is a continuous process and should be a strong part of the council's neighbourhood working model.

Recommendation 7

Continue to keep the medium-term financial strategy under review - testing assumptions and undertaking sensitivity analysis – and continue to report to Members on a regular basis.

The council has a robust Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and updates and position statement briefings have been presented to Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board. Through this process the council is carrying out detailed scenario planning and sensitivity analysis to ensure that the MTFS is as accurate in its projections as possible. In addition, it also seeks to identify risk mitigations to manage the impact of known and unknown risks, such as through use of temporary or new long-term savings plans, use of reserves, treasury management strategy approaches or through service reviews across those areas identified as

presenting a financial challenge. This process is one that the council carries out annually to ensure a robust budget and MTFs can be approved by Cabinet and Council.

Work is underway on the council's budget plans for 2024/25 and MTFs for 2024/25 to 2025/26 and should be delivering a balanced budget for 2024/25 with a projected £6.6m gap against the 2025/26 budget. The peer team was assured that the council has a good grip on its finances and is aware of its future financial challenges.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council for undertaking an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge 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.

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(On behalf of the peer challenge team)