LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Stroud District Council

8th – 10th March 2022

Feedback report

1. Executive summary

Stroud District Council (SDC) is a good council – it has ambitions to be great and is progressing well on the way to achieving this. The council had a corporate peer challenge in 2019 and invited a peer team back to assess their progress, comment on the council's response to the pandemic and share views on the newly adopted Council Plan and delivery ambitions.

Having spent time at SDC, and taken a range of background information into account, the overriding message from the peer team is that the council should be proud of what has been achieved over the last three years and in responding to the pandemic.

The Action Plan created by the council following the corporate peer challenge in 2019 put in place the building blocks to enable SDC to move forward with confidence. The impression that the peer team has been left with following this recent peer challenge is that the council has set some strong foundations in place and can use this as a springboard to now focus on achieving its ambitions.

A 'One Council' ethos is clearly developing, as evidenced by officers working across teams and all members developing their corporate loyalty and commitment to the council. This ethos is driven right from the top, with the Leader and Chief Executive promoting and demonstrating this approach. SDC can now take the opportunity to build on this and embed the 'One Council' ethos across the whole organisation so that values and behaviours are consistently demonstrated, and organisational capacity is strengthened by cross team working.

The council also has the foundations for a good strategic framework to take forward its ambitions. For example, The Council Plan, which it adopted in October 2021, along with the 'Fit for the Future' (FFF) modernisation programme provides a comprehensive strategy for the next three to five years to deliver on the key strategic priorities as agreed by residents and businesses. Likewise, the 2030 Strategy provides a longer term approach to addressing the climate and ecological emergency and becoming a carbon neutral district by 2030. There is recognition by senior officers that these three significant building blocks now need to be interwoven to provide a clear framework which will help smooth and accelerate the delivery of the council's aims.

As one of the actions following the previous corporate peer challenge in 2019, a meetings framework of regular meetings was put in place to create time for strategic conversations with group leaders, the Political Alliance and Committee chairs. However, now that strategies have been set and Plans are being adopted, the peer team felt that the frequency of these meetings could be reduced to release capacity of senior officers to focus on delivery of agreed priorities.

A number of new councillors were elected to the council at the last election in May 2021. Becoming a councillor during the pandemic and working within the required restrictions will have been particularly challenging. There is an opportunity now for a Member Development Group to be created to produce an ongoing programme of member training and development to help understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities of members and officers and shaped to members ongoing needs and requirements.

The council staff we spoke with clearly feel supported by the senior management team, particularly through Covid. During this time staff worked hard to undertake additional tasks as necessary on top of the day job. Officers, including the senior management team, now need the opportunity to focus singularly on delivery of the strategic plans set by the council.

Information Technology (IT) is making great progress, and everyone is looking forward to the new digital platform to support customer engagement. The new platform will improve the council's digital offer to residents and businesses and help develop case management systems and better integration of back office systems.

There is a clear and positive intent on community engagement, and there are consultations and engagements taking place, or planned across the council (e.g., with the parishes, with the community engagement plan, through the Stroud District Local Strategic Partnership). This could usefully be translated into expected outcomes, agreed with communities and co-ordinated across all services.

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:

2.1. Pace of activity

Ensure there is sufficient corporate and strategic capacity, focus on reviewing progress to date and plan effectively for the delivery of agreed plans and strategies. Focus on the delivery of what you have agreed are your priorities to ensure that what you do is done well and your activity is outcome driven.

2.2. Capacity of senior leadership team

Consider the structure in place for informal meetings now that key Plans are in place – are meetings proportionate? Consider the capacity of your senior leadership team so that they can continue to deliver for you as they have been doing very capably.

2.3. Create a Member Development Group

Create a Member Development Group to coordinate and prioritise a programme of ongoing member training and support new members to find their place in the council and understand and embrace the member officer protocol. If Members own this agenda, they can shape it to what they need.

2.4. Clarity on embedding the One Council ethos

Ensure there is a coherent plan that sets out how the One Council ethos will be embedded across the whole council (officers and members). This includes officers working across departments and it includes officers and members displaying corporate loyalty and mutual respect to each other.

2.5. Action plan for improvement to housing services

Continue to work on your action plan for improvement for housing services making sure the teams within that service understand their corporate responsibilities and feel that they are an integral part of the council. Ensure a clear plan to put tenants at the heart of what they do.

2.6. Opportunity to reset Customer Services

Customer Services - there is an opportunity to reset your approach, making it more efficient, corporate, and centralised. If Customer services (or Community contact) is carried out to its highest level, you can free up resource by answering and responding to queries at first point of contact. Good customer service leads to a highly regarded council.

2.7.   Align the council Plans and Strategies

As the council's FFF Programme is rolled out, ensure it aligns with the Council Plan, 2030 Strategy and MTFP and there is a clear internal communications plan, alongside the Community Engagement Plan. The Community Engagement Plan could include expected outcomes agreed with communities. There is clearly work done on external communications and engagement with the media. Ensure that there is also attention paid to internal communications with a communications strategy to ensure that resources are appropriately assigned to both aspects.

2.8.   Working with town and parish councils

Consider working more effectively with town and parish councils to maximise the developing relationships – whilst developing the Working Together project to put a protocol in place for engagement, continue and enhance the regular forums that are in place already (for example they could be theme based e.g., how towns and parishes can engage in planning policy, or planning consultations and see the results of their engagement).

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:

- Tom Beattie   Former Leader of Corby Borough Council
- Katherine Marriott   Chief Executive, Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Bindu Arjoon   Deputy Chief Executive, Exeter City Council
- Paul Clarke   LGA Principal Adviser, South West
- Kathryn Trant   LGA Peer Challenge Manager

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 to these questions, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on the response to Covid 19 and support to the community and reflections on the new Council Plan and delivery ambitions.

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. Pre-engagement calls took place, and a focus group was held with town and parish council representatives in advance of travelling to Stroud. The team then spent two and a half days onsite at Stroud District Council, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 29 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.

- Spoke to more than 80 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

SDC adopted a new Council Plan in October 2021. The Plan sets out an exciting vision for the district for the next five years. Each of the three priorities within the Plan; Environment and climate change; Community resilience and wellbeing, and Economy, recovery, and regeneration; is underpinned by strategic objectives and delivery plans.

There is potential now to build upon the launch of the Council Plan with strong communications, performance management and feedback loops. The development of a Community Engagement Strategy will enable the views of the various communities to be considered by setting out methods for more meaningful consultation. This will support the council and enable it to be better connected to communities, as well as demonstrate that the council is putting communities at the heart of what it does.

That engagement with communities will be an important focus and source of information as the Plan moves to delivery and, in time, review. The Community Engagement Strategy should especially address how the community voice is reflected and heard, from town and parish councils, the voluntary sector, community groups for example.

It was positive to see that SDC is developing a data, evidence, and insight approach which will help to drive improvement. This is 'work in progress' and at the same time plans for the use of the newly created performance management framework are being established. As such now is an ideal opportunity to join these two things up, so the council can see how its insight work and use of data is used effectively to help deliver priorities and improved outcomes.

As the FFF programme is rolled out it will be important that it aligns with and underpins the effective delivery of priority outcomes for the council. FFF covers four workstreams which are the building blocks for SDC to deliver its priorities for its residents:

- Connected Communities – work has been commissioned on developing an Asset Based Community Development approach to help inform thinking on how the council will deliver on its mission statement to put communities at the heart of what the council does

- People and Organisational Development – progress has been made in this workstream but there is recognition of the need to embed across the council now that the focus on responding to the pandemic is receding

- Technology and Digital – the peer team heard evidence of progress in this workstream including the procurement of the digital platform and significant improvements to the infrastructure

- Service Delivery – council performance in some areas is of the first order, for example, waste and recycling collection, whilst in other areas, especially in respect of housing related services there is work to do. The key performance headlines for the council are recorded in the LG Inform report for SDC, which is hosted on the LGA website. Importantly, in respect of housing, we were made aware that there is an action plan in place for improvement and the council should continue to work on it to make housing services a truly corporate team and higher performing service which puts tenants and residents at the heart of what they do.

4.2.   Organisational and place leadership

The Action Plan produced following the corporate peer challenge in 2019 included a number of recommendations relating to organisational leadership, all of which have been achieved. As a result, there is a new senior leadership team in place which has clearly created far stronger strategic capacity at the top of the organisation. A formal structure of formal and informal meetings has been created to facilitate strategic conversations between senior members and senior officers. These conversations have enabled the development of better collaboration at an early stage of policy and plan development leading to the production of agreed priorities and plans.

Based on the high levels of trust and respect that the peer team witnessed, the frequency of informal meetings could now be reduced to release capacity of the senior leadership team so that they can focus on delivery of the agreed priorities.

Member and officer relationships at SDC are good and this is demonstrated right from the top. The peer team heard of the strong relationship between the Leader and Chief Executive which embodies the characteristics of strong and purposeful leadership. This means they both, working within their own political and managerial leadership remits, work effectively across the range of political groups – no mean feat. SDC is led by a Political Alliance that has been in operation for ten years. Members and officers work well together in this complex political landscape however, it naturally takes energy and resource to do so.

SDC could consider maximising links to the county council by using dual hatted councillors. This would help to strengthen the political relationship between the two authorities. There is evidence that this is happening, but it could be built on with more cross party working.

Partners reported the council's genuine desire to work with them and referenced a change of culture that has taken place at SDC with the arrival of the chief executive in 2018, which has resulted in a rekindling of partnership working and a significant increase in engagement to achieve good outcomes for SDC and other partners too. The increased engagement, a desire to promote Stroud and work effectively with partners has been supported by the Leader, who also works on national bodies to represent Stroud and Local Government. Notable examples of effective partnerships include the joint procurement of a digital platform with Cheltenham Borough Council and joining the One Legal partnership. Partners fed back that they welcome the different views and insights that come from SDC and that a range of political and officer views are beneficial to productive partnerships.

The council has a growing regional and national profile, and it is developing a good reputation, for example, in respect of climate change, regeneration and its proactive approach to tackling equality, diversity and inclusion. Given this, SDC is well respected by partners, and they are keen to see the council continue to develop this leadership of place.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of the relationship with town and parish councils in the sharing of information, requests for support and additional capacity. Improvements have already been made to these relationships, and this is being consolidated with the introduction of the Working Together project which will look to agree, develop, and implement a new strategic approach for partnership working. Regular meetings are now being arranged, along with the development of a charter setting out what town and parish councils can expect from the district council in respect of communications. SDC is now recognising the value of town and parish councils as community champions and development of a charter will help to provide some consistency in the approach to partnership working. Whilst the Working Together project is a positive step, town and parish councils are ready to build on the current relationships they have with the council, and SDC should consider picking up the pace of delivery of this work. Additionally, continuing and enhancing the regular forums - perhaps with a theme based focus - will support the development of the Charter with Town and Parish Councils.

There is a clear commitment from conversations with the Political Alliance and senior management team to put communities at the heart of everything the council does. It is also captured in the mission statement for the FFF programme. However, the methodology to achieve this is not consistently understood across all council services and the peer team think the council would do well to reflect on how it might best achieve this. Providing clarity on the council's intentions, focus and outcomes required will help to progress and promote implementation across the council and should result in tangible improvements within the district communities.

Many staff told us that the council provided good support to them during the pandemic. Particular reference was made to the introduction of Wellbeing Ambassadors and the caring approach of the senior leadership team throughout. A culture of empowerment rather than "command and control" is beginning to be felt within the council following the arrival of the chief executive in 2018 and the significant culture change programme she has driven. It was clear to the peer team that Heads of Service and staff feel trusted and empowered, by political and officer senior leadership. A Hybrid Working policy has been introduced which is positive, however the peer team felt that staff may also welcome a more considered framework of structure and guidance around the requirements that will now, and into the future, be made of them about attendance in the work place for

example, to give consistency across the council whilst still allowing for managers and teams to work in the ways that best suit them.

An Equality, Diversity and Inclusion plan has been developed. Representatives from the Youth Council told the team of the meaningful engagement that had taken place with them as the plan was developed and how they felt their voices had been heard. The EDI plan is welcomed, it has staff buy in and there are equalities champions across the council whose responsibilities include promoting and raising awareness of EDI issues, ensuring EDI is an integral element of the council's strategies and policies and facilitating organisational change in response to EDI issues. There is a member/officer Equalities Working Group to monitor progress against the EDI action plan. These activities supporting the EDI agenda are seen as positive both internally and externally. The Community is being consulted and engaged in finding answers on how to deal with challenging historical contexts. For example, the Black Boy statue in Stroud, and street names linked to colonial or slave trade histories.

4.3.   Governance and culture

The recommendations relating to governance and culture arising from the 2019 Action Plan have been addressed with the introduction of structured meetings at a strategic level and the creation of a Forward Plan which allows members and officers to review decisions and the development of key projects and policy at an early stage.

The peer team heard that relations between members and officers are generally good. A Protocol for Member and Officer Relations was adopted in May 2020. The overriding principle of that Protocol is for members and officers to recognise and respect one another's different roles and responsibilities. It is worth reflecting on that principle, as it is well recognised that the best performing councils have clarity around those separate roles and do not allow them to become blurred.

A Corporate Policy and Governance team has been introduced. This team sits centrally and incorporates the previously separate functions of Democratic Services, Elections and Executive Support. Formation of this team has added emphasis to the effective production of council policies and essential frameworks and structures for the sound operation of the council.

The One Council philosophy is reflected in the way that the senior leadership team operates. They operate corporately with the Council's, rather than departmental, interests at heart. This is mirrored by cross party working and good relationships between members. There is cross council collaboration on projects and staff reported positive experiences of services working together. This has been inhibited by remote working but now that hybrid working has been rolled out, there is an opportunity for structured in person sessions which will help to build on these positive experiences.

There is evidence of good cross - service working at Head of Service level; there is now an opportunity to build on this by allowing this group of senior leaders more opportunity to develop their own agenda for how they work more closely together to embed the 'One Council' ethos.

The peer team heard that the chief executive and senior leadership team are open and well respected and model the cultural change that they want to see. The next stage is to ensure that this infuses across the rest of the council and thought should be given to how best to achieve this as we come out of the pandemic.

The council has an effective governance model in place and operates a committee system. SDC had a number of new members at the most recent election and to become a new councillor working within the restrictions imposed by the pandemic must have been challenging. New members in particular may benefit from a co-designed programme of ongoing training and support to help them find their place in the council. The creation of a cross party Member Development Group supported by the Corporate Policy and Governance team would help to coordinate and prioritise training, not just at Induction, encourage member attendance at training events and embrace the protocol for member officer relations.

4.4.   Financial planning and management

The council has strong financial leadership. It has demonstrated effective stewardship and grip of its resources. A balanced budget has been set for 2022/23.

This strength of approach has also been demonstrated through Covid 19 with monitoring of costs and pressures developed and appropriate provision made for future costs. There was regular reporting to members during 2020/21 to ensure transparency and member involvement, resulting in members being sighted at all

times on the challenges faced by the council and the mitigating actions taken.

The recent budget consultation exercise was purposeful, engagement with members was strong and the council now has a good platform from which to go forward with its Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

Budget reporting and engagement with members is reported as good, members know and understand the council's financial position, challenges, and opportunities and are clearly well sighted and engaged with.

The council has built a strong reserve base that will help support and smooth its future plans over the period of the MTFP. The council consistently achieves an unqualified audit opinion.

The FFF modernisation programme has been designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the council. As a consequence, financial savings have been highlighted. Aligning the FFF programme and the MTFP will be useful to ensure that the progress of the FFF programme enables delivery of the financial savings in the MTFP.

Given the experiences of the last two years, a number of councils have seen slippage of delivery of their capital programme. SDC is one such council and the council would do well to keep this under review. Monitoring and review will be important for all significant projects, for example, clarity on the council's approach to funding of retrofit and new homes and acquisitions in terms of impact on funding needed for ongoing repairs and maintenance.

4.5.   Capacity for improvement

The council is on a journey of improvement, and it has ambitious plans for the future. At the same time, it is important to take stock and reflect too; unsurprisingly for example, senior members and staff fed back that staff have worked hard, particularly during the pandemic, and some teams are tired. The council should now take a pause and reflect before progressing ahead, planning for the delivery of the actions and activities to support the agreed strategies. To ensure success, the council needs to agree a set of prioritised activities that are deliverable within the resources and capacity that it can harness and ensure a strong programme management culture underpins its work to avoid scope creep, the distraction of other tasks being added and keeps solely focussed on what it has agreed needs to be delivered.

The peer team heard reports of residents and businesses having difficulty accessing the council and its services during the pandemic and the customer contact/access systems were criticised by a number of people. There is an opportunity here to reset the role of Customer Services, the first point of contact at the council, to make it more efficient, corporate, and centralised – this is a core focus for the FFF programme. By taking a corporate rather than departmental approach to customer services, consistent performance standards can be set and maintained which will result in better feedback from residents and businesses.

The peer team heard about the role and work of the Neighbourhood Wardens and how they are clearly a valuable resource, providing a visible presence across the district and acting as the eyes and ears of the community. We didn't review their role or potential in detail, but we did wonder whether, as part of its 'One Council' approach, there could be the potential to harness the added value these staff bring, for example by working more closely with the housing teams and other community and front-line staff so that the residents see a fully joined up service from council staff.

As part of the Connected Communities workstream of the FFF programme, the council is developing a Community Engagement Strategy to facilitate positive collaboration with communities across the district. It will be important for the strategy to be used to enhance and develop neighbourhood arrangements, to support council ambitions and help build community capacity, and to enable the community to have some influence in council decisions. The Community Engagement Strategy should link back to the Council Plan and the 2030 Strategy and should be an enabler to those key council plans and strategies.

The council has purposefully established a range of joint arrangements in place that have built capacity and resilience. These include Ubico, a partnership for waste and recycling collections, One Legal and the joint procurement of the IT platform. Given this positive stance, the peer team felt that there may be further opportunities to explore which could include, for example, the future plans for leisure provision. The peer team heard from partners across all sectors that they are keen to see SDC continue a leadership of place role.

One of the actions from the 2019 Action Plan referred to ensuring the integrity of the IT system. This is a medium term action which is well on the way to being achieved.

The peer team heard only positive comments about IT at the council. IT systems will be the foundation for the transformation programme, and a new digital platform is being jointly procured. This digital platform will help to develop one view of the 'customer', but it will be important to apply a collaborative approach and for services to share their data if the benefits are going to be fully realised.

4.6.   Response to Covid

The peer team heard that SDC is a friendly and efficient council and that throughout the pandemic the council worked to distribute grants to businesses and did not miss a bin collection.

Whilst the tactical response to the pandemic was clearly and importantly multi agency, the council very much played its full part. District councils were seen by county wide partners as the 'real backbone' of the response. This coordinated county-wide effort, along with effective cross party working and external communications throughout the pandemic, focused resources and provided a more valuable response by working together for the benefit of the residents and businesses of Stroud district.

The actions taken by the council throughout the pandemic to support community resilience were regarded as positive. The Community Hubs Development project will build on that positivity and ultimately improve cross sector working and collaboration.

In improving that cross sector collaboration across the district, town and parish councils should not be left behind. The council could give thought to the role of town and parish councils during an emergency response. This could be a theme for discussion in the Working Together forum as mentioned earlier in this report and could provide capacity for SDC whilst cementing the position of the town/parish council as a valued part of their respective communities.

Whilst responding to the pandemic will have impacted on all services across the council, the peer team particularly heard positive feedback on the role of teams in Environmental Health and Revenues and Benefits. This included translating complex guidelines and rules from government for businesses, and then enforcing them (e.g. "a substantial meal") and working around the clock and over weekends to get business grants to local businesses to help them stay afloat.

Internally, staff have universally reported to the peer team that they felt very well supported during the pandemic in terms of their health and wellbeing. Now that staff are beginning to return to the office, more guidance on the implementation of the hybrid working policy will help to build confidence about returning and consistency amongst office based staff, all of which will help the 'One Council' culture to embed across the organisation.

4.7.   Council Plan and delivery ambitions

As expected for a council that embraces improvement, the Council Plan adopted in October 2021 is ambitious, as is the FFF modernisation programme. The council would do well to just consider its organisational capacity to deliver against the agreed timescales within the Plan. Whilst the council wants to be flexible in its approach to issues as they arise, it will be important to focus on delivering the actions that support the agreed priorities and not allow requests for additional activities to divert attention and resources, putting the delivery of the Plan priorities at risk.

The council has introduced a Performance Management Framework that will use data to support delivery of the priorities within the Plan. Performance Management reports will be created that evidence progress against delivery of priorities, and the peer team heard that the first such report is about to be presented to the appropriate Committee. Publication of these reports in the public arena will improve transparency and assist residents in holding the council to account. Member involvement in the process via the appropriate Committees is critical to monitor progress and performance. Working jointly, members and the senior leadership team will ensure successful delivery of the Plan as the senior leadership team will be able to allocate resources appropriately.

The FFF modernisation programme is beginning to be rolled out. The programme has absorbed the remaining activities to support the recommendations from the 2019 Action Plan relating to IT and workforce planning. Whilst the peer team heard of the rationale behind the programme, they also heard from a number of staff who, whilst keen to see the programme rolled out, have concerns about their capacity to deliver at the same time as taking care of the 'day job'. Staff will need to be supported in managing priorities and workloads to ensure service levels are maintained and staff wellbeing is protected. However, these are exciting times for the Council and FFF should be embraced as an opportunity to keep the council at the forefront of local authority innovation.

The FFF programme should align with the Council Plan, 2030 Strategy and the Medium Term Financial Plan. Clearly, achieving the above will be easier if there is a clear internal communications plan, and this should all be informed by the Community Engagement Strategy. Any future updates to the Council Plan should reference/align with the FFF programme. Indeed, it will be important that all the plans and strategies align so that there is a single version of the truth for council priorities, progress against delivery, resource implications, budget position and how they are all interlinked.

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 session, which provides space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires. paul.clarke@local.gov.uk.