

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Re-visit

Sefton Council

8th and 21st – 22nd April 2022

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Sefton last had a Corporate Peer Challenge in September 2018. The Council were keen to have a follow-up to their previous Corporate Peer Challenge for many months following this, however the timing of which would have fallen within the most intense response stages to the COVID-19 pandemic. The scoped purpose of this work is therefore only to feedback on the progress against the recommendations made in Autumn 2018 and as such is not there to provide feedback on other areas in any further depth, such as children's services, climate and digital (for example).

It goes without saying however, how significantly the world has changed since the Council's last Corporate Peer Challenge. Members and officers speak with great pride at how the Council responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners also speak positively around how partnership working really showed itself during this period, with partners coming closely together, working as one team, across Sefton. There are now opportunities available from this that the Council can build from, which feature throughout this feedback.

Since September 2018 the Council has worked purposefully to establish a much improved approach to economic growth which is now starting to deliver for Sefton. Progress can be seen against the recommendations made previously in 2018, as detailed throughout this report. Like many, the financial position of the Council was significantly challenged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been prudently managed into a much improved position in 2022 also. During the last peer challenge, the Council were also challenged to more clearly define their areas of commercial activity, this position is now much clearer and is detailed within this feedback.

However, the job is never done in local government and the next set of challenges and opportunities are there to be tackled. On the back of the various opportunities, challenges and changes in the operating environment, now is the perfect moment to



take stock of these and set out with partners a way forward which can help in successfully navigating a sustainable path through. This includes taking stock and planning for new ways of working and the future financial challenges including the impact of changes in the national economy. It also includes the role of the localities model and how it may evolve, as well as the capacity and partnerships required to deliver against the local ambitions. The next planned refresh of the vision for Sefton presents an opportunity to capitalise on.

Refreshing a strategic vision should always lead to consideration being then given to the strategies and plans that underpin that vision at both a partnership and Council/corporate level. Doing so helps ensure that suitable plans and strategies are in place for the delivery of the refreshed vision – avoiding a gap developing between the refreshed vision and local delivery.

Following the planned refresh of the vision for Sefton, the Council are recommended to ensure that the Council's most key corporate priorities over the next three year period are stated in the underpinning strategies and plans, with clear milestones and metrics over this period as well as the 'enabling' activity required in order to achieve these priorities. This is particularly important given the capacity and resource challenges the Council faces. The Council is clearly self-aware of the gaps it has in capacity and the challenges faced across the region in regards to many of these. The Council is taking steps in order to address these. Addressing these capacity gaps will be important to the Council achieving the key priorities for Sefton across the short and medium term.

Stating the specific, key corporate priorities of the Council over this next period will help to keep them front and centre, corporately and collectively owned. It will be important to ensure that the drive to improve children's services is reflected in this. Suitable corporate monitoring and accountability will also be important for keeping on track, for supporting early and well informed remedial / corrective action and avoiding any future surprises.

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. **Ensure the planned refresh of the vision for Sefton is used as an opportunity to then ensure the underpinning strategies and plans reflect the key priorities of the Council over the next period such as improving children's services.** This should lead to clear and specific, corporate milestones and metrics that can be performance managed . This refresh can be used to further inform activity to address key capacity and skills gaps also.
- 2.2. **Inform the above work by taking stock, internally and with partners of the new opportunities, strengths and challenges that the Council will wish to build on, capitalise from and address in the next three year period.**
- 2.3. **Embed the service level improvements in performance management made recently and establish regular, collective and cross-cutting performance discussions at Cabinet.** This should be supported with a performance scorecard which tracks progress against the Council's key corporate priorities. Also then ensure that similarly routine performance information is provided to Scrutiny and all wider members.
- 2.4. **Given how much change the world has seen in the last two years and how the localities model has been required to react, work with partners to review the localities model.** This may include how it should and could be adapted looking ahead and in light of the strength of partnership will, the amount of community interest reported and the next set of challenges for the Council. This should also look again at ways in which all members can be engaged with the model looking ahead.
- 2.5. **Continue to build on the significant progress seen in regards to economic growth.** Further grow the improved relationship with the Combined Authority and look at how business leaders can be routinely

engaged strategically, routinely as a collective, with a role across the wider priorities for Sefton, as well as how the learning from strong engagement with young people can be a feature of other, future funding bids. There is now also an opportunity available to more closely connect the health challenges and opportunities available locally to Sefton's economic direction.

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 for this peer challenge were:

- **Ali Griffin** (Chief Executive – London Councils)
- **Cllr Sir Stephen Houghton** (Leader – Barnsley Council)
- **Jayne Traverse** (Executive Director (Place) – Cheshire East Council)
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – **Dan Archer (LGA)**.

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team explored progress against each of the recommendations from the original peer challenge, under the following themes.

Whilst further feedback was given, beyond these recommendations – making this relevant to the current wider, corporate operating environment, this was not a full Corporate Peer Challenge and as such, did not aim to look at individual service areas beyond the below.

Local Priorities and Outcomes

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- **Prioritise the refresh of the core purpose.** This will help ensure the council's contribution to the delivery of Sefton 2030 by targeting capacity at a carefully sequenced set of key priorities.
- **Strengthen corporate performance management.** The cabinet should receive a comprehensive, corporate performance management report on a quarterly basis. This report should be accessible and allow the cabinet to understand the progress being made by the council against the key priorities. A suitable report should also be made available to scrutiny.

Corporate Transformation

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- **Refresh and make clear form, function, accountability and pace of delivery for the localities model.** The team acknowledged the ambition being shown by moving to this new delivery model and endorsed this as the right direction of travel for Sefton.
- **Be clear on the council's parameters around commercialisation.** This requires both officers and members to have a consistent understanding of what commercialisation means for the council as well as the options that can be considered and those which will not. This will allow the council to focus its efforts on the right commercial opportunities for Sefton.

Economic Growth

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- **Accelerate work on a local economic growth strategy alongside efforts in the Liverpool City Region.** This will help Sefton benefit more from the opportunities presented by the Liverpool City Region and ensure that more schemes are in place ready for future funding opportunities.

Member Development

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- **Develop the role of all members in a changing context for local government and a changing model of delivery locally.** This should reflect the role of all members in their communities and the capacity they can attract to support the efforts of the council. This would mean the council more consistently co-producing solutions with communities and partners.

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. Over the course of this peer challenge, the team:

- Gathered information and views from more than 25 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.

- Spoke to more than 65 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

The Sefton 'Core Purpose' summarises how the Council will play its part in realising the aims and objectives of the Sefton 2030 vision. The previous CPC highlighted the strength of the Imagine Sefton 2030 consultation that led to the development of the vision for Sefton. This CPC also details how well the Council and partners now understand the long term vision for Sefton 'the place'.

The peer team recommended at the previous peer challenge for the Council to refresh the Core Purpose as a way of helping ensure that capacity is targeted at the right places, at the right time and in sequence. The Council completed a review of the Core Purpose following the previous CPC and members and officers fed back to the peer team during this peer challenge that the Core Purpose and underpinning Framework for Change are now widely understood.

The actions underpinning the Framework for Change are also seen by many as having been key to the improvement in the financial position of the Council over the last two years. Many also feedback that in the area of economic growth, the Council has had to purposefully prioritise schemes and programmes which has had a positive impact in building and sustaining momentum.

The Council have committed to a refresh of the vision for Sefton. Following this

refresh, the Council will naturally want to look at the strategies and plans that underpin this vision to avoid a gap emerging between strategic intent and delivery. When doing this, ensuring the corporate priorities of the Council are well communicated with visible and relevant milestones, measures and timescales over the next 3 years will be important. This can then help to focus support and foster further collective corporate as well as aid performance monitoring.

It is clear from those the team spoke to whilst on site that given the improvement needed in children's services, that this will need to remain a key, corporate and collectively owned priority. The Council received an OFSTED focussed visit in February / March 2021 which contained priority actions. The Council were awaiting the report from a recent full OFSTED ILACS inspection at the time of writing.

In taking this opportunity to state the key corporate priorities for the Council, it is also an important opportunity to signal the opportunities and future transformations the Council will pursue. There are a number of new opportunities, strengths and challenges that the Council will wish to build on, capitalise from and address in the next three year period. Taking stock of these and how to navigate this path with partners is a useful step and is a feature of the work on corporate transformation, localities and medium term financial planning. In doing this, there is a chance to take stock now of what that *post 2023* Council could look like – and what this may require in terms of capacity, capability, ways of working, as well as the Sefton approach to agile / hybrid working.

Key to obtaining, sustaining and further developing collective ownership is ensuring all members and officers are regularly and suitably briefed on the progress being made across the corporate and borough wider priorities. Engage all members and officers in the story of how Sefton has and will be changing – what this means, the opportunities this might create and the challenges it can present. Continuing to do this can take different forms and there is practice already in place to build on. For example one member of staff fed back to the peer team positively about their experience since joining the Council, being able to attend a staff forum which started

to do this, highlighting how useful this was.

In terms of performance management, some improvements can be seen from when the team were last on site in 2018. Regular portfolio performance dashboards for each Cabinet member, showing performance by service area had recently been put in place with the Council starting to embed this approach. Cabinet members individually now have quarterly (or more frequent) portfolio dashboards, with an annual collective Cabinet performance report also produced.

The senior officer team consider performance, primarily through the risk register which senior officers feel has started to improve and informs subsequent deep dive activity against the key risks. The risk register is also seen regularly by the Audit and Governance Committee who also review this.

The Council is also taking steps to develop its data warehousing infrastructure to support more agile, informative and relevant metrics, in line with the steps being taken by many other councils. This includes how the various different data sets available to the Council are warehoused and integrated as well as looking to utilise the benefits of Power BI more in future. Senior leads are keen to further support the development of the requisite skills amongst senior officers to make the most use of this new functionality – including the required analytical skills. The LGA are happy to support performance leads at the Council to work with their equivalents in other councils to share their experiences of making such changes.

The [LGINform](#) data for the Council identifies that the Council performs better than its most similar socio-economic neighbours on measures such as the percentage of 16 and 17 year olds not in education, employment or training, smoking prevalence in adults, the teenage conception rate and the new business registration rate. The Council performs below its most similar socio-economic neighbours on measures relating to child protection plans as well as the number of Children Looked After and levels of physical activity amongst the population aged 16+.



The improvement in the Council's financial position over the last two years especially is featured later in this report. Key to this improving picture was a collective, corporate effort supported by regular monitoring reports to Cabinet. The peer team is of a clear view that a similarly regular approach to monitoring and management can bring the same benefits to corporate performance. Ultimately this has a significant bearing on the Council's financial performance in any case in areas of demand led budgets (for example).

In order for Cabinet and the senior management team to be able to take the most informed resourcing decisions and get ahead of issues, a combined three-pronged approach which routinely enables an understanding of risk, performance and finance is key. Doing this can also help the Council to identify successes earlier – to celebrate and learn from them collectively.

The Council would benefit from having regular, collective and cross-cutting performance discussions at Cabinet, informed by a performance scorecard showing progress against the Council's priorities in a suitable level of detail that enables this strategic, shared focus on the most key issues and opportunities. Most councils have a performance dashboard against their corporate priorities, with the metrics based on the priorities set out in this document.

The Council should also then ensure that similarly routine performance information is provided to Scrutiny and all wider members, and whether more service performance information can further assist Scrutiny in their role, building on the performance information they receive currently.

It is often the case that aligning and integrating staff working on performance information into a corporate core can help to support resilience, skill sharing, staff development and further cross cutting analysis. This can be of particular value as a Council is looking to spread the use of performance information further and increase



the quality of information and analysis available. The Council appears to have taken some steps to integrate performance staff and will be able to consider whether this is sufficient or whether more could be done and at what stage in light of the changing approach to performance management.

4.2. **Corporate transformation**

At the time of the previous Corporate Peer Challenge, the Council were considering their approach to commercialisation and the various different approaches to this. There were different opportunities available, with different perspectives on these opportunities, some of which had more political appetite – others less so. The CPC recommended that the Council develop a commercialisation strategy which sets out the agreed parameters and principles for commercialisation, to enable a clear focus for officers.

The Council now has a much clearer position on its direction around commercialisation. Whilst this does not take the form of a written strategy, the parameters for this were shared with the team consistently, verbally by those the team spoke with. Those being the commercial opportunities which are local, with a significant contribution to the wider outcomes for Sefton and within the realistic capacity available to the Council. At present this activity focusses on 4 main areas – Sefton Hospitality Operations Limited, Sandway Homes, Sefton New Directions and The Strand Shopping Centre in Bootle which was purchased before the last peer challenge in 2018 for regeneration purposes.

As these enterprises mature the Council will want to ensure that the governance for them is kept under review so it is in line with the current advice and leading practice across the sector.

The Council's revenue financial position has improved significantly over the last 2

years as a result of prudent financial planning, management and monitoring. Over this period, the Council has been dealing with the impact of COVID-19, purposefully re-building the general reserves position and investing in the improvement of children's services. General Reserves will have been rebuilt to around £15.6m (or 6.5% of Net Revenue Expenditure) during 2022 and the amount the Council spends on children's services has increased from £33m in 2018/19 to £52m in 2022/23, with no further growth planned from 2023/24 onwards.

The job is however, rarely complete when it comes to future financial planning and management and in Sefton a funding gap of £8.9m (before council tax increases) will need to be addressed in 23/24 and 24/25. Should any overspend or additional spending pressures materialise during this period, in the absence of further direct central government funding or the ability to raise further receipts via council tax this will also need to be dealt with from efficiencies and budget reductions. Like all councils, specific consideration will also need to be given to the costs relating to inflation and the potential for a larger pay award across the sector.

At the time of the previous peer challenge, the Council were developing a localities model of service delivery which had taken some of the initial steps in regards to the estate. The Council were recommended to make clear the intended form, function, accountability and pace of delivery of this new model.

Many of those the team spoke with indicated that the locality hubs had played a crucial role in supporting local communities through the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners in particular echoed these sentiments and also recognised how partnership working more generally had been such a key feature of the response to the pandemic – for example:

“The way we responded as partners to the South African variant especially showed the absolute need for us continuing to work closer together” – one partner.

Relationships with health have also improved significantly since the last peer challenge – a point which is consistent with what has been seen from other LGA peer support in Sefton, has also been seen during this process too – *“there wasn’t a chink of light between us and the Council during the COVID response”* (a health partner).

The world has changed so significantly over the last two years and since the team were last in Sefton, colleagues at the Council report that there have been incremental changes to the model. The feedback given by many the team spoke with, was that now is the perfect time to take stock of the model in light of all of this change to consider how it could and should be adapted further moving forward. This review may take into account elements such as:

- Where appropriate, sustaining relevant, new ways of working established during the COVID-19 response stage as a permanent feature of locality based working going forward.
- Dealing with the level of appetite from some members of the community / community groups in further volunteering and local community action.
- How the model aligns with the shift to the new health and social care ICP and ICS landscape as well as the opportunities available to Sefton from having the joint place lead role.
- Reflects the role of the localities model in the children’s improvement programme.
- Sustains and re-builds the pre-COVID partnership gains (e.g. locating of police in locality hubs).

Partners are clearly keen to continue working in different ways with the Council, where it helps Sefton and are encouraging the Council to take this lead. A stocktake or review of the model, done with partners can aid in this regard.

The refresh of the localities model should also look at the relationship between



localities and all ward members. The Council may wish to consider again how the localities model can be used to further help members to fulfil their community leadership roles. There are many different ways of doing this, some of which have been piloted previously here already and whilst the peer review does not advocate one specific model, it does encourage ward member involvement.

The localities model in Sefton plays an integral part of the place based early help, intervention and prevention offer which is key to demand management across the people based services. Feedback is given elsewhere in this report around performance management and early help is one area which may also benefit from further support in terms of having a timely, locally specific and well informed routine performance management arrangements. Whilst the impact of early help, is often longer term in nature and therefore difficult to see in real time, there are ways in which the impact, reach and outputs from early help can be monitored and further performance managed, given how central this is to both the needs of local communities and the budget strategy.

More generally, when speaking to members and officers of the Council the team had consistent feedback from a number of different service areas, that capacity was particularly stretched and in many ways, one of the Council's biggest challenges. In areas such as finance and legal, approaches in recent years to 'grow their own' staff appear to have paid off. Whilst the major benefits of this can take time to realise – as staff are trained, become qualified and more proficient, the benefits – especially given the capacity challenges facing many councils in similar roles, are clear.

In particular representatives from the Council consistently flagged the capacity challenges faced in children's services as well as in place based services and in procurement. It is clear that those capacity challenges – the same which challenge many if not most councils, directly impact here on two of the most key corporate priorities of the Council at this time. As difficult as recruitment and retention often is in the particular fields, the peer team would ask the Council to consider if there is anything else it could do to encourage future recruitment, retention and staff

development. The examples from finance and legal may provide one example to potentially replicate in different ways, equally the coastal lifestyle available in Sefton, which many had reflected was something that they have cherished even more over the last two years may be another way to attract new staff. There are no simple solutions to this challenge, however there may be further opportunities to explore.

4.3. Economic Growth

In terms of the Council's approach to economic growth, the Council has made great strides in this area since the team were on site in 2018. A local economic growth strategy is now in place with 6 key workstreams underpinned by various connecting projects and programmes. The impact of this is starting to be seen economically with examples shared with the team of the effect this has started to have in parts of Southport (as just one example). The Council was successful in its bid for a town deal for Southport, securing one of the largest town deals in the country. In July 2021, the Council also invested £1.4m into the refurbishment and repurposing of the Market Hall in Southport which has been seen to have a positive impact also on surrounding business interest.

Whilst prioritising economic activity can often be difficult, the impact of this can be seen in delivery. Members recognise that those areas prioritised across Sefton are the right ones and officers in these services appreciate that prioritisation, particularly in light of the wider capacity challenge, has been key to accelerating progress and subsequently generating further local interest.

The relationship that the Council now has with the Combined Authority in regards to economic growth is in a different place to what it was previously. Those from the Council and the Combined Authority working at this interface report feeling that *"we're working together as a team"*. The Council have taken purposeful steps to bring this new relationship to this point – with the Executive Director working from the Combined Authority base, 1 day per week pre-pandemic as just one example. This

brought great benefits in terms of building a new relationship and is something that should be returned to, built upon and continue wherever possible.

This improved relationship with the Combined Authority is being seen in the support for those schemes prioritised in Sefton. Examples of which include the Combined Authority covering the difference from inflated construction costs, on key schemes previously, such is their commitment to the value they present locally. Colleagues at the Combined Authority are happy to be involved more as a further sounding board to colleagues in Sefton.

The funding secured for the Southport Town Deal was nationally significant and it is clear from the feedback received by the peer team that the reason this bid stood out so much, was the extent of meaningful engagement with young people that was demonstrated. Engagement is a strength that was highlighted in Sefton at the time of the last peer challenge and something that the Council has been able to benefit from significantly, working in partnership with others. The Council are very much encouraged to take the learning from this. Utilise the local strengths in this field and consider how the same level of engagement could become a similarly key feature of other priority schemes (e.g. 'Levelling Up' in Bootle).

It is important to remember that continuous, meaningful engagement will remain important as an ongoing feature, after funding is secured. This is important with the various reference groups at key junctures as it is with local business leaders and other partners.

The Council may wish to establish a key local businesses leaders forum for example, which is an approach taken by many other areas and can play an important role in securing influence, advocacy, challenge, ideas and further connections. This can also have the effect of securing private sector social value contributions to some of the wider challenges being tackled locally.

There are already examples of the consideration of health outcomes in economic growth projects (e.g. – the new housing strategy which includes significant health input). There may be more opportunities to do this cross cutting thinking at a strategic level. How can inclusive growth, health and social value become more of a feature in the next planned refresh of the Economic Growth Strategy for example? The Council may also be able secure further social value from contracts although further capacity may be required in order to do this (noting the points raised elsewhere throughout this note around the challenges in terms of procurement capacity).

4.4. **Member Development**

To fit with the recommendation at the last peer challenge around developing the form and function of the localities model, which was emerging at the time, a recommendation was also made to develop the role of all members in a changing context for local delivery.

Since the last peer challenge, the Council have taken a number of steps to support member development (more widely). The Council have revised the induction programme locally for all councillors as well as the wider programme for member development following a review by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in November 2019. The new member development programme was launched in May 2021 and has been subsequently reviewed via a members' survey, which provides a positive view of the approach to member development now in place locally. The feedback from this survey was used to launch a refreshed offer, which was agreed at Full Council on the 21st April 2022, during the time in which the team were on-site. Members also feedback to the team about how they can see that member development has improved since the team were last on site.

There are particular examples of good practice which the team were also informed about. An example of which is the use of joint training between members of the planning committee and relevant officers. This is seen as good practice, with

additional benefits for both the members and officers involved. This may give an approach that could also be utilised in other areas / with other committees.

A cross-party member development steering group has now been established, which can give this area additional cross-party input and focus and can be a real strength for the Council. Some members flagged with the team whether more could be done to support Scrutiny members in their role. This is something the Member Development Group could look at and is also something to test further with Chairs and members of Scrutiny. The Council currently has four Overview and Scrutiny Committees, all of which are chaired by members of the ruling Labour group. The LGA would be happy to support the Council to consider support for members and Chairs of Scrutiny. This can include listening to the experience of how scrutiny currently operates, drawing on the characteristics of good scrutiny (impactful, engaging and so forth) and in light of a changing environment for local government.

The team spoke with the Council about support for senior members also and ongoing succession planning. This is not limited to the events, courses and mentoring individual members receive, but also the opportunities to be engaged in different roles within decision making – for example some councils choose to operate a Deputy Portfolio Holder roles or ‘Lead Member’ roles where appropriate.

Given the references elsewhere to ensuring that improving children’s services is a key corporate priority – looking at the ongoing offer to and role of all members, as well as those on specific committees will also play an important role.

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. The Council in this case has also already previously indicated a wish to have a full Corporate Peer Challenge in 2023 which could be used to take stock of the other wider issues not covered as part of this work.

Helen Murray is the LGA's Interim Principal Adviser for the North West and Dan Archer is the Council's lead contact at the LGA. Dan is available to discuss any further support the council requires following this progress review - daniel.archer@local.gov.uk.