

# Corporate Peer Challenge

## **Selby District Council**

14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2017

Feedback Report

# 1. Executive Summary

Selby District Council is an ambitious council with a good overall understanding and awareness of the opportunities and challenges the place brings. There is strong political and managerial leadership with a sound financial base supporting the protection of front-line services.

The Council is ambitious to grow the local economy and this is clearly shared by elected Members, staff and the Council's strategic partners with a strong sense of purpose behind it. Everyone the peer team spoke to was signed up to the growth agenda and recognised the need to balance the delivery of this ambition with the day to day delivery and protection of front-line services.

The building blocks to deliver economic growth in Selby district are clearly in place and opportunities have been identified to support the delivery. Partnerships are strong and there is clear commitment from the Council and its partners to maximise the opportunities the local area can bring. Partners are heartened by the commitment shown by Council staff to the agenda they have signed up to and as a result they are also committed and have signed up to that same agenda.

The Council's Better Together Programme with North Yorkshire County Council is working well, has achieved some good outcomes and has the potential to deliver even more. The peer team was impressed by this programme and would encourage the Council not to lose sight of the opportunities that can arise by developing this programme of work further.

Members and officers know Selby district the place and are as one in understanding their priorities in order to make a difference. There has been a "sea change" at Selby District Council with members and officers now "aligned to the vision going forward". Priorities are clearly articulated in the corporate plan and the clear focus on economic growth demonstrates a desire to develop a new economic future for the area which could have significant economic and social benefits.

Members and officers work well together and there is evidence that the Council's stated values are embedded within the organisation. There has been change in the managerial leadership of the organisation recently and this is now leading to the Council becoming a more confident and secure organisation. There is good understanding of the nature and scale of the challenges the Council faces and the political and managerial leadership team has grasped these in a positive way. There are good trusting relations between senior Members and staff and clarity of understanding of Member and officer roles and responsibilities.

Staff at Selby District Council are knowledgeable, committed, enthusiastic and open to new ways of working. Partners commented that they find Council staff to be "personable and approachable", open to new ways of working and who now act as facilitators to the delivery of their shared vision.

In moving forward, the peer team would suggest that the Council should "keep it simple" when developing its strategic plans and should always be clear about what is important

and communicate this internally and externally. If strategic plans are kept simple then everyone will understand what the key messages are, what the priorities are and how they will be delivered. In essence, key stakeholders will find it easier to align themselves to helping with the delivery of them.

The peer team would also recommend the Council to strengthen the relationship between strategy and benefits to local communities by promoting a consistent yet simplified, message which clearly spells out the benefits of economic growth for local people and how the quality of their lives could be improved in the future. This should be backed up by robust outcome targets against the ambitions. Delivery should be monitored and performance managed against the agreed outcome targets.

The peer team found the Council to be an emerging organisation that is now settling down into its newly focused role with an abundance of energy and commitment. Therefore, in order to harness this energy into the future the peer team would recommend a more strategic approach to organisational development that recognises success and achievements and celebrates these together.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- 1) ***Refresh the Corporate Plan on an annual basis and ensure the wording and language is reflected in other corporate documents.*** This will ensure there is read-through between what the vision is and what is being delivered and achieved.
- 2) ***Council action plans should be reviewed to focus on a shorter number of key actions*** and a clearer steer provided to staff on what needs to be delivered, by when and by whom.
- 3) ***Better define and articulate the Programme for Growth and its governance processes*** so that there is clarity on what the priorities are and how their delivery will be managed.
- 4) ***Review and improve scrutiny arrangements*** to ensure that there is healthy and adequate challenge within the Council to help with improvements
- 5) ***Develop more effective mechanisms to provide wider and up to date insights into customer and residents' aspirations and needs.*** This will ensure that service developments and transformations are based on accurate information about needs and wants.
- 6) ***Strengthen internal and external communication to ensure key messages are clearly communicated and successes celebrated.*** This will ensure that everyone is aligned to the agreed priorities, can easily understand their role in the delivery of these and that the 'Selby Brand' is well established.

- 7) ***Develop a more strategic approach to organisational and workforce development*** to pull together how the Council will attract, retain, support, develop, recognise and reward its people to meet its priorities

### 3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

#### The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Selby District Council were:

- **Garry Payne** (Chief Executive, Wyre Borough Council)
- **Councillor Neil Clarke** (former leader of Rushcliffe Borough Council)
- **Tracy Aarons** (Deputy Chief Executive, Mendip District Council)
- **Steve Capes** (Head of Regeneration and Policy, Derbyshire Dales District Council)
- **Frances Marshall** (Adviser, LGA)
- **Satvinder Rana** (Programme Manager, LGA)

#### Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to Councils' performance and improvement:

1. *Understanding of the local place and priority setting*: Does the Council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. *Leadership of Place*: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. *Organisational leadership and governance*: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?

4. *Financial planning and viability*: Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. *Capacity to deliver*: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, the Council asked the peer team to comment on how well it is achieving its stated vision of making the Selby district 'a great place'; re-assurance about the Council's capacity to transform the way it operates to ensure future sustainability; a view on how well the Better Together arrangements with the County Council are working - specifically to deliver the aims of making the best use of joint assets and to join up services across both councils; and to give a view on how realistic and achievable the Council's plans to enable growth and investment in the district are and whether they deliver the required outcomes.

The peer challenge team has attempted to address all these points within the main body of the report.

### **The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement. 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 for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite at Selby District Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 85 people including a range of Council staff together with Councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 45 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 250 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 7 weeks in Selby District Council.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2017). In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

Selby District Council is an ambitious council with a good overall understanding and awareness of the opportunities and challenges the place brings. It is seen as a leader among the North Yorkshire districts which engages positively with its stakeholders and understands its place and potential. The ambition for economic growth is clearly shared by elected Members, staff and strategic partners. The Leader and the Chief Executive are driving the growth agenda through visionary leadership within the Council and advocacy with external stakeholders. There will always be a need to bolster understanding of this agenda by continuously engaging with all Members, officers and partners.

Members and officers have an intuitive understanding of Selby district the place and are able to articulate what the key opportunities and challenges are. However, the data that sits behind this understanding is perhaps lacking. There is therefore potential to develop a better understanding of the community's needs by collating appropriate data through, for example, residents' surveys. This can then be used to support the intuitive understanding of the place and local communities; as well as assist with evidence-based decision-making.

There is clarity of ambition for the place with clear priorities articulated in the Corporate Plan 2015-2020. However, the actions that sit beneath this plan need to be refined and shorter in number. Some of the action plans that the peer team saw and reviewed contained numerous steps which were not really actions but rather statements and intents. The number of activities set out in action plans are broad and wide ranging and there is a danger that the Council could lose focus and spread its capacity too thinly. The peer team would therefore recommend that the Council should break down its programme of activities into annual priorities for delivery with a clear picture of the expected outcomes, particularly as they relate to the quality of people's lives. This will enable the Council to better sequence activities, performance manage them and deploy its capacity more effectively by tackling the things that are most important first.

The Council's economic growth ambitions are clearly articulated in the Economic Development Framework 2017–2022....and beyond, which has 3 key strategic priorities, 7 priority growth sectors and a focus on unlocking 5 key sites for development, developing skills in the local population and regenerating market towns. The task now should be to fine-tune the strategy and communicate it among Members, staff, partners and the community to ensure wide and deep buy-in to the new vision, which is critical. The Programme for Growth supporting this framework needs to be more clearly aligned to the key priorities and the proposed actions need to be clearly defined, agreed, articulated and communicated internally and externally. This was a specific request from business partners, community groups and elected Members to enable them to understand why the Programme of Growth has been developed as it has.

Furthermore, the relationships between strategy and benefits to local communities could also be strengthened and the vision communicated more consistently. The vision and economic ambitions are talked about in a number of documents, but there should be better read-across these and the ambitions condensed down into simple messages. This will help business partners to align their efforts to the priorities and will help local communities to better understand, in simple form, what it is that the Council and its partners are trying to achieve and how they are investing in the local area. This will require strengthening outcome targets and performance management against ambitions to demonstrate how the vision and economic growth are delivering outcomes for local communities.

## 4.2 Leadership of Place

There is a very clear focus on economic growth in Selby district and this is a key driver for the Council and its partners. Partnerships are strong and relationships with strategic partners, including North Yorkshire County Council, the business community, Selby College and the two Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) - e.g. Leeds City Region and York, North Yorkshire & East Riding LEPs - are good. The Council is very well regarded by the two LEPs and is seen as “punching above its weight”, “a place to do business” and a “leader in the sub-region”. It has secured a substantial infrastructure loan to kick-start the Sherburn2 business park development and funding for the Olympia Park. Importantly, it has cleverly cultivated relationships so that it remains aligned with both LEPs.

The very strong and positive comments from partners place Selby district in a very good position. For example, it has clear aspirations for growth, its LEPs are saying some really positive things about the way the Council delivers services, and its business partners are signed up to the ambitions for the local area – all these point to a great opportunity for the Council to maximise its relationships and move forward with its ambitions and plans.

Nevertheless, the Council’s ability to deliver its ambitions still needs to be demonstrated. So whilst people see some Members and officers as leaders in the locality and at the forefront of some things, the Council as a whole needs to more clearly articulate what it is hoping to achieve, when it is going to do it and what has been achieved. This will help to increase its credibility around delivery among its citizens and partners.

The Better Together programme is a productive partnership between Selby District Council and North Yorkshire County Council. It is underpinned by strong working relations between the District Council and County Council which sees the Chief Executive of Selby District Council also engaged as an Assistant Chief Executive at North Yorkshire County Council. The programme has streamlined operations, created opportunities, and brought a raft of tangible benefits to both Councils. The programme is seen as setting a blueprint and partners are hopeful that other districts will follow suit and join in. All the evidence the peer team saw pointed to an impressive programme that is working and delivering benefits, and it is surprising that other districts are not taking advantage of that. However,

regardless of whether other districts come on board or not the peer team would recommend that the two existing partner organisations should continue with it as it is clearly working.

There is positive change in the Council's cultural thinking and this is reflected in the way elected Members, senior officers and managers go about their business. Members, and in particular the Leader, have been described as committed, supportive and understanding. They are passionate about their communities and the place and have a good understanding of the issues that need to be addressed. The peer team was particularly impressed with the work being done by the Community Engagement Forums (CEFs) within their communities through the creation of partnership boards, localised development plans and money from the Community Fund for small-scale local projects and initiatives. There is great potential in using the CEFs to bolster the Council's engagement with local communities and develop its capacity for the future. In doing so, thought should be given to resourcing implications and the need to ensure CEF plans reflect aspirations of all.

### **4.3 Organisational leadership and governance**

There is strong political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision making arrangements across the Council. Executive members have a good understanding of their portfolios and the new management team has brought a positive dynamic into the organisation which has improved staff morale.

However, greater clarity of responsibilities is needed where portfolios overlap, for example delivery of economic growth. There will always be overlap with portfolio holders, particularly if your ambitions are around inclusive growth, as that can make it very difficult to separate out the responsibilities of portfolio holders. Nevertheless, a little more thought needs to be given to bring more clarity so that officers understand who they need to brief and who they need to approach to get a decision.

The relationships between Members and officers at all levels are open, honest and effective. This evidences the 'One Team Selby' approach and is playing out to the Council's advantage among its external partners and providing a secure foundation for staff to deliver quality services. The peer challenge team came across clear and compelling evidence that the Executive and the management team are working very closely and effectively together.

The peer challenge team was impressed with the quality of staff they met. They were motivated and enthusiastic about the future. Staff morale is good and they are "proud to work for the Council". This is sending out a really positive message to external stakeholders and thereby fostering greater confidence in the organisation. In order to further motivate staff and increase productivity, the peer team would encourage empowering staff to make decisions and enable them to operate with more autonomy and greater accountability. Staff are open to this and



are quite prepared to be subject to greater accountability if that decision making process is delegated down to.

There are good examples of internal and external communication such as monthly staff briefings, suggestion boxes, blogs, celebration events, conferences, etc. However this can be improved by ensuring messages are clearly communicated from top-to-bottom and vice-versa; and appropriate monitoring to ensure there are no blockages. This was the view of staff and partners who said “sometimes messages get through but sometimes they don’t due to blockages at certain levels”. The Council should therefore collectively ensure that messages, ideas and views are able to filter from top-down and bottom-top.

Scrutiny arrangements in the Council appear weak and are in need of review. Clearly, as in many local authority areas, there is work to be done on thinking this through. We therefore recommend that you explore ways to provide support to the Scrutiny Committee to consider the benefits of aligning and coordinating its work plan with the Corporate Plan. This will enable it to scrutinise the delivery and impacts of the priorities of the Plan. It can do this by scrutinising work through commissions and deep-dives around key work programme areas, strategic priorities, and critical issues impacting on Selby district’s citizens.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and viability**

The Council is in a strong financial position and has had a significant financial windfall from business rates. It holds healthy levels of reserves, although nearly £10m has been utilised to pay off the Pension deficit in 2017. Even so, this still leaves significant reserves from business rates for which the plans are not yet clear. The Council therefore needs to take advantage of the windfall and its favourable financial position to generate revenue streams so as to ensure future financial stability. By using this money in a really effective and sustainable way it will help the Council’s financial position, particularly if government grants are reduced in the future. Having adequate income streams will enable the Council to continue delivering services and fulfilling its ambitions for growth.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is reviewed annually and is realistic with appropriate risk levels identified. There are robust financial management arrangements in place and external auditors have issued an unqualified audit opinion on the Council’s financial statements.

The peer team placed particular focus on the Programme for Growth and thought that the governance for this programme is unclear and there is uncertainty about the process of implementation or its success. It is important to be clear on what the decision making processes are, what the delivery mechanisms are, what is monitored and how and who will performance manage it. The Programme for Growth will give the Council credibility through what it actually delivers and the outcomes it achieves as a result of that delivery. Therefore, all the projects that sit underneath the programme need to be performance managed so that what is being delivered and achieved can be demonstrated. Strengthening these aspects

will help the Council gain credibility for the programme and explore more confidently how it can be expanded in the future as things move forward.

There has been financial investment in the corporate priority of economic growth, for example through the enhancement of the economic development team. This is sending out a clear message that the Council is serious about its economic growth ambitions and is becoming more business orientated. Whilst this needs to continue it is also important to ensure that the political and managerial leadership team does not lose sight of the fact that there is a whole suite of services to be delivered which the public need and want now.

There is evidence of significant savings delivered by the Better Together programme with further projected savings by 2021. Cashable savings to date of approximately £400k with a further £1m identified for delivery by 2020 demonstrated the value of this programme. This is in addition to the non-cashable benefits of increased resilience in service delivery and economies of scale through shared services, focused and joined up delivery of services at a community level through the community hubs, innovative platforms for customers and communities to access Council services, and better asset management.

#### **4.5 Capacity to deliver**

The Council has aligned its organisational capacity to enable it to deliver against its strategic objectives. Some key service areas have seen increased resources for example the economic development team. However, capacity of other key service areas such as Planning should be regularly reviewed to ensure the delivery of corporate objectives. All Council services will be important to the people of Selby district and they will rightly expect them to be adequately resourced. Regular reviews of capacity should ensure that there is no negative impact on what the Council is trying to achieve for Selby district and its people.

The Council is now settling into its newly focused role and has an abundance of energy and commitment. Staff are geared up to grasp the opportunities and address the challenges that the Council and the local area present. The peer team would therefore encourage the Council to harness this energy into the future through a more strategic approach to organisational development that recognises success and achievements and celebrates these together. Our recommendation is that the Council explores how it can further develop its approaches to recruitment and retention, staff appraisals, rewards, communication and engagement, and training and development. Studying the results of the recently conducted staff survey would be a good point to start this process.

Externally, there are good relationships with strategic partners and plans are being developed to set up an Economic Partnership with the business community and a single development team approach on key development sites with North Yorkshire County Council. This is to be commended as it will help in moving the relationships from one of consultation and engagement to one where joint delivery is planned and implemented.

There are also good working relationships with the parish and town Councils as well as the voluntary and community sector which help to deliver some local services. Nevertheless, there is potential to develop this approach further and boost the Council's capacity. These partners are up for doing more by working in partnership with the Council to improve and deliver services at the grassroots level. The peer team would therefore encourage more open conversations with them on what needs to be done and how they can help to deliver. By further developing its working relationships with these partners the Council will not only be able to maximise the resources and expertise that come from them, but can also secure ownership of the vision for the place at the grassroots level.

In addition, accelerating the emerging digital and transformational agenda will help unlock efficiencies and service improvements further. The Council has already made some headway in developing innovative access platforms for customers and communities through the Better Together programme. However, there is potential for this to be developed further through more up to date technologies aimed at not only customer facing aspects of services but also how staff manage their work on a day to day basis through more mobile and flexible working.

#### **4.6 Other comments on specific focus areas**

The peer team was impressed with the recent work on economic development which is starting to pay dividends. For example, 2,000 more people are in work with ambition to create even more jobs. Business partners were very clear that Selby district was a place they wanted to invest in and it was a place where they were going to deliver some very tangible projects. They are very ambitious for the area and the Council needs to ensure that it plays an important part in that delivery. But more importantly the Council rightly deserves to take the credit for the part it plays in that process of delivery by ensuring, for example, more timely responses to planning applications.

Elected Members and officers have a key role to play in the delivery agenda going forward. For example, actions need to be developed to retain skilled and qualified people within the area. This will mean working with local businesses to identify the type of jobs they will be bringing to the area and then working with schools, colleges and other training providers to develop the appropriate skills among local young people. This will also entail making families and young people aware of what the opportunities are likely to be and helping them to position themselves to fill those jobs.

Although relationships with the two LEPs are good, they are at present at the project level and need to be developed at the strategic level so that Selby district is embedded in the LEP strategic framework. This may mean greater strategic involvement of the Council in the work of the LEPs around inclusive growth and the industrial strategy. It can do this by promoting Selby district's strategic development sites so they appear in the future plans of one or both the LEPs.

The successful 'Selby District Growth Conference' has galvanised excellent working relationships with the business community. Partners spoke very highly of that Conference and would welcome continuing dialogue with the Council. The peer team would therefore suggest that the Council develops that kind of engagement further so that targeted meetings with key investors, businesses and training providers are held regularly to engender greater interaction and joint delivery of corporate objectives.

In order to deliver inclusive growth and ensure the health and wellbeing of existing and future communities there should be an appropriate range of housing stock, investment in skills, town centres and villages to maximise the benefits of the growth agenda. Economic growth should translate into both social and economic benefit for local people. The Council will need to make sure that local families are aware of the opportunities that may be coming in the future. By working with the business community, schools, colleges and training providers the Council can ensure that the demographics of the local population remain in balance and that money earned locally is kept locally to help the area to continue growing.

The growth ambitions should not therefore simply be about the square footage of land that will be developed but what outcomes will be achieved for the local area and the people who live there. To help achieve this will mean making sure that the right type of houses are built in the right place for the right people; that opportunities to gain the necessary skills are available locally; and that towns and villages are regenerated whilst making sure the local environment is protected and attractive. This will make people want to stay in Selby, to work in Selby, raise their families in Selby and invest in Selby.

## **5. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the 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.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: Tel: 07747 636 910 and Email [mark.edgell@local.gov.uk](mailto:mark.edgell@local.gov.uk)

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

## **Follow up visit**

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

## **Next Corporate Peer Challenge**

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all Councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2022.



**Satvinder Rana**  
Programme Manager

(On behalf of the peer challenge team)