

# South Kesteven District Council

LGA Bespoke Remote Peer  
Support

July 2021



# Bespoke Remote Peer Support

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work including the core offer of a corporate peer challenge.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused their support and adopted a new remote approach. This new approach does not replace the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge offer.

## Background

Between 13 and 15 July 2021, South Kesteven District Council (SKDC) undertook a series of LGA Bespoke Remote Peer Support sessions. The purpose of the support was to help SKDC in its thinking as it seeks to develop a programme of 'people' focused activity around culture, performance and change, by providing:

- a temperature check of where the Council is in terms of workforce culture and engagement, as well as alignment between corporate priorities and resourcing; and
- reflections on the key areas to focus on going forwards to drive performance and improvement.

The Peer Team included the following participants:

- **Stephen Baker**, Chief Executive, East Suffolk Council
- **Cllr Abi Brown**, Leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- **Kirsten Burnett**, Head of Policy and Organisational Development, Hyndburn Borough Council
- **Satvinder Rana**, Programme Manager, LGA
- **Frances Marshall**, Adviser, LGA

The first stage of the support was a desktop diagnostic, with the Peer Team reviewing a range of documents and information. This was followed up with two half days working remotely with SKDC, during which the Peer Team:

- Spoke to more than 94 people including a range of council staff and councillors.
- Gathered information and views from more than 17 meetings conducted remotely.
- Collectively spent more than 60 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 8.5 days in South Kesteven.

This report provides a summary of the Peer Team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the Peer Team on Tuesday 27 July. In presenting feedback to the Council, the Peer Team has done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants, or inspectors. By its nature, the Remote Peer Support is a snapshot in time, and the Peer Team appreciate some of the feedback will be about things the Council is already addressing and progressing.

The second phase of the support will be an action planning workshop. This will enable SKDC to share with the Peer Team their emerging plans for taking forward a programme of activity to drive culture and performance change, and for the Peer Team to offer reflection as critical friends as well as share learning and practical suggestions from their experience elsewhere in the sector.

## Executive Summary

South Kesteven District Council (SKDC) is ambitious for change and has accomplished a significant amount in a short space of time. A phenomenal breadth of large-scale reviews, changes and service improvement projects have been undertaken over the past 16 months, as well as investment in workforce engagement and supporting staff welfare. This has all been against the backdrop of responding and adapting to the COVID 19 pandemic.

The positive impacts of these efforts can be seen in the organisational culture which – after a number of years of different leadership styles and changes - is moving in a positive direction. There is nevertheless a recognition that there is a significant way to go and that this will take time to achieve. SKDC is self-aware about where it is on its performance and cultural change journey and is focused on driving this forward to achieve its ambitions for place and performance.

The leadership, ambition and energy of the current Leader and Chief Executive in driving these positive changes cannot be underestimated. The recently completed Corporate Management Team (CMT) has already had a positive impact and can now 'share the load' in promoting and role modelling SKDC's organisational values, behaviours and priorities. With a recently reshuffled Cabinet as well, now is an opportune moment to invest in developing a cohesive political and managerial leadership team.

CMT has a strong understanding of the areas and scale of challenge, and many staff recognise the need for change and are passionate about their roles. SKDC is doing the right things to establish a positive 'one team' organisational culture and drive performance improvement. Inconsistencies and variation in culture, behaviours and performance nevertheless remain, and are evident across different parts of the organisation. These can be seen through variation in staff: understanding of the Corporate Plan and their role in delivering it; sense of feeling valued, equipped, and supported; awareness of communications and engagement mechanisms; collaboration across teams and departments; and relationships with elected members. Critical resource gaps in certain areas, blurred Member and officer roles and responsibilities, and some problematic Member behaviour has been impacting on SKDC's ability to achieve its ambitions. These are all aspects which SKDC is aware of and is either taking steps to address or has plans to do so. Effective prioritisation and rationalisation will be key as SKDC moves forward because it will not be possible to do everything at once.

The Council is doing the right things and putting the building blocks in place to bring to life #TeamSK as a vehicle for promoting collective identity and shared values, and a joined-up operating model to deliver the ambitions within the Corporate Plan. The Council can do great things and has both the ability and flair to deliver against its ambitions - but meaningful change will take time to achieve and become embedded.

Intensifying workforce engagement, underpinning its activities through a well-resourced communications plan, and fast-tracking some 'quick wins' will improve two-way communication and help reinforce corporate messages, values and behaviours. Perseverance, resilience, and constant reinforcement will be required. SKDC can have the confidence to draw a line under the past and keep faith in the path they are on. Trust, engagement, and results will follow.

## Leadership

The strong, energetic, and joined up leadership of the Leader and Chief Executive over the past 16 months has brought stability and a clear direction to SKDC. This is reflected in broad organisational support for their ambitious drive for positive change and cross-party recognition for

this. The authentic and open approach of the Chief Executive has been welcomed by staff who have met her.

The Leader and Chief Executive are supported by a cohesive Cabinet, with consideration towards other Members, and a recently completed CMT. This newly formed leadership team provides a good platform from which to continue to drive forward the current momentum SKDC has achieved. Investing in team building between CMT and Cabinet, as well as external Member development opportunities (such as mentoring and training), would help foster a strong cohesive team and create a positive environment for collaborative Member – officer working.

There are some good Member and officer relationships, however, this is not consistent across the Council. Examples were raised of some problematic Member behaviours towards staff and blurring of lines between Member and officer roles and responsibilities (e.g. micro-management, reprioritising operations, inappropriate attitudes, and behaviour). These are distracting from the Council moving forward. Member - officer relationships could be strengthened by setting clear boundaries and expectations around roles, responsibilities and behaviours (e.g. through clear Member Role Descriptions, a robust Behavioural Framework, and some externally facilitated training). Elected Members and senior officers role modelling new organisational behaviours, values, and ways of working will be important in re-building trust across the organisation.

Although only recently formed, the positive impact of the new CMT, with a strong blend of new recruits and existing CMT members, has already been felt and there is excitement for the potential of this new leadership team. This additional capacity will be vital in driving forward change initiatives by 'sharing the load'. There is a desire from staff for senior managers to be more visible throughout all levels of the organisation. Intensifying efforts to ensure CMT members are highly visible will address this, as well as help reinforce #TeamSK identity and goals. Identifying senior management and Cabinet Member leads for corporate priorities, organisational values and behaviours is one approach which could engender high profile role modelling, engagement, and buy-in. Through these actions the Council will ensure SKDC maintains its improvement momentum and achieve its ambitions.

## Organisational Culture

The organisational culture has experienced different leadership styles and changes. The legacy and cultural memory of organisational churn and leadership styles are still affecting how Members and officers operate and feel. The organisational culture was described by some as lacking trust, transparency, and accountability, and in which fear, micro-management and silo working were common. Inconsistencies in organisational culture, staff morale, effectiveness of communications, and cross-team working are evident across the Council. These can vary by team and department. SKDC's leadership has a strong understanding of the areas of challenge and is doing the right things to improve the organisational culture. There is evidence that this is having an impact with parts of the organisation describing the culture as '*on a journey*', '*good*', '*effective*' and staff reporting that they '*feel supported*'. There is nevertheless a long way to go. Visible, consistent action and commitment from officers and Members will help to re-build trust. Messages will inevitably take time to land and embed so repetition and reinforcement will be needed. It should not be forgotten that during this time the Council has been responding to, and affected by, the COVID 19 pandemic. The traction and impact of the Chief Executive since joining can provide confidence in SKDC's path, demonstrating what can be achieved.

Whilst #TeamSK is referred to by those in leadership positions, it does not yet appear to be a collectively owned identity or way of working throughout the Council. #TeamSK has huge potential as a powerful vehicle and brand through which to reset organisational behaviours, foster a 'one team' approach and secure organisational buy-in to SKDC's change agenda. To achieve this, investing in internal communication and strengthening two-way information flows will be paramount

for success. Developing a strategic communications plan - underpinned by requisite resources and aligned to the leadership team - will provide a framework through which to coordinate activities to have greatest impact.

Intensifying workforce engagement activities is also a crucial part of this. Considerable efforts have been made in terms of workforce wellbeing. Workforce engagement mechanisms however are not realising SKDC's aspirations for effective top down, bottom up, and cross organisational communications and collaboration. Finding the right ways to reach and engage with different staff groups will be important in shifting organisational culture. Good news stories - such as being nominated for the Municipal Journal Workforce Transformation Award - can be an effective way to showcase the behaviours the Council wants to embed. Keeping on reinforcing core messages until they get through, with people proactively demonstrating the corporate values and behaviours of #TeamSK will be critical.

Developing and agreeing a strategy for future ways of working – such as plans around hybrid working, future accommodation and communications – will add to SKDC's suite of tools to use and provide levers to reinforce cultural change and promote the new direction of the Council. Ensuring operational instructions follow policy will be key to reinforcing messages and behavioural change

## Strategic Planning and Performance

The wealth of changes introduced over the past 16 months – such as Corporate Plan, service plans, staff appraisal system - are starting to have a bearing on staffs' perspectives and working practices. These changes have been largely welcomed in those parts of the organisation where they have permeated. There is a good understanding of the Corporate Plan and the 'golden thread' in some teams, such as SMT and frontline staff in corporate functions. This is not the case however throughout the organisation, with many individuals unaware of the Corporate Plan and how it relates to their role. Further work is required to raise awareness – with staff and elected Members - of the corporate priorities, organisational values and behaviours, and individuals' responsibilities in delivering them. Showing a clear alignment of resources to corporate priorities and developing a greater understanding of these allocations among staff and front-line members will help to secure buy-in and delivery.

SKDC's verve for improvement is evident by the breadth of reviews, change initiatives instigated over a short and incredibly challenging period. Being mindful of capacity and prioritising effectively will be important as SKDC looks to move forward. Prioritising and tackling at pace those issues that will make the biggest difference will further drive progress, avoid overstretch and allow SKDC to deliver against the findings of existing reviews. Collectively agreeing as a leadership team the Council's 'burning platforms', and developing an action plan for these key priorities, with clear performance measures, timescales and senior level responsibilities will help drive forward improvements and monitor progress. This will support SKDC's aspirations to be an efficient and effective organisation which delivers quality services to its residents.

The introduction of the new performance reporting process and cycle, as well as resources committed to it, have been a positive development. It provides solid foundations which should help SKDC to focus on priority areas where urgent change is most needed. Having robust systems in place to capture and analyse the raw data will be important. The performance management framework is at a 'pivotal point' in its evolution and will require an iterative process to build, refine and embed to fully realise its potential. SKDC's senior leadership team actively championing the importance of performance reporting will be instrumental to ensure its success and organisational wide adoption.



## People Management and Capacity

SKDC aspires to be a learning organisation. There are examples of staff being developed, supported with training opportunities, and achieving career progression. The reintroduction of the appraisal process has been widely welcomed. There is also an ambition from Cabinet for 'end to end' improvements to Member induction and development to ensure this learning and development ethos is also Member focused. SKDC's efforts to recognise and harness talent could be bolstered by developing a corporate learning and development plan for staff and Members, promoting cross-organisational learning, and making use of external learning opportunities. This will further reinforce the Council's new direction.

The SKDC staff which the Peer Team spoke to were loyal, passionate, and committed to their jobs. They spoke highly of their immediate teams, and a strong team ethic was clear. Whilst some staff reported feeling valued, supported, and equipped in their roles, this was not the case across all teams and departments. Frequent staff turnover and resourcing gaps are adversely impacting on staff satisfaction, with some frontline staff reporting being frustrated, exhausted and not feeling valued. There was also a perception of inconsistent approaches to performance management, high levels of absence, and 'staff voices' not being listened to. Supporting staff with the right equipment and environment to do a good job, and for them to feel valued, will engender both goodwill and drive performance. Continuing to work robustly to deal with poor performance and any adverse sickness levels will help achieve this and improve consistency. Tailored approaches to performance management will be required to also address 'blockers' to change who, irrespective of positive intentions, can impede organisational performance. Unblocking barriers to enable staff to feed up suggestions, including into service planning and decisions, so their voices are heard and inform decision making will also have a big impact. Addressing critical resource gaps is also paramount for SKDC to have the capacity to deliver on its ambitions. HR is an acute example of this where recruiting senior HR support is something the Council are in the process of addressing.

The existence of silo working across SKDC and adverse impacts of this are widely recognised. A lack of knowledge of who does what within the Council is a significant barrier to productivity, and to fostering a 'one team' approach. There is a strong desire, among those the Peer Team spoke with, to address this through closer cross-council collaboration. Supporting the building of professional peer relationships, promoting cross-organisational collaboration, and enabling shared learning opportunities will help break down these barriers. Improving the intranet offer will be an important tool for this. For example, including an up-to-date staff directory with contact details of who works in each team will go a long way to addressing information gaps. Fostering succession planning and eliminating 'single points of failure' by utilising systems to capture processes, knowledge and learning will help to mitigate the negative impacts of staff turnover.

Plans are already in train to clarify and streamline the decision-making and report clearance processes. This will support more efficient decision-making, providing a mechanism for cross-departmental collaboration and empowering staff. Streamlining processes and addressing blockages such as these would be widely welcomed - empowering, and trusting heads of service, middle managers, and their teams to deliver.

## Change and Continuous Improvement

The Council has already undertaken significant change and service improvement projects in a short, and incredibly challenging, time span. A new direction for SKDC has been laid out and there is strong commitment through the CMT, Leader and Cabinet to drive positive change. There is recognition among some staff that change is necessary. This provides the opportunity to build on

momentum and gain traction. The permeation of change messages however is patchy, with engrained ways of working remaining, corporate messages not filtering through, and bottom-up communication not embedded. More consistent and comprehensive communications will be needed (see organisational change paragraph).

The Council is doing the right things and getting the building blocks in place for a strong 'golden thread' (e.g. Corporate Plan, service plans, values, behaviours etc). It will take time nevertheless to see meaningful change. Prioritising the delivery of some quick successes could go a long way to win hearts and minds and drive performance improvement. For example, getting an up-to-date organisational chart with contact details off the ground, or new uniforms and equipment for certain teams would have an immediate impact.

The Council should keep faith in the path it is on by continuing to embed the processes, systems and new ways of working to deliver culture change and corporate ambitions. Consistency, resilience, and reinforcement will be needed to embed the new organisational culture.

## Recommendations

### Leadership

**1. Intensify efforts to ensure the new CMT is visible in the organisation to connect with staff and reinforce #TeamSK identity and goals.**

Identifying 'champion' roles from within the leadership team around corporate priorities values and behavioural work could help achieve this. Organising 'all staff days' and regular team/departmental away-days and meetings will help to practically demonstrate and cascade the new ways of working in the organisation.

**2. Invest time in developing a strong, cohesive leadership team.**

Techniques to support this could include development sessions between CMT and Cabinet, and investment in support for leading Members via external development and mentoring opportunities.

**3. Strengthen Member-officer relationships to create a positive environment for collaborative Member – officer working.**

Clarifying of roles and responsibilities could be achieved through the development of clear Job Descriptions for Members and development of a robust Behavioural Framework that is built around the Council's core values. This can be supported by a series of externally facilitated Member-officer workshops.

### Strategic Planning and Performance

**4. Be mindful of capacity to undertake further reviews and deal with existing 'burning platforms' by prioritising those that will make the biggest difference.**

Agreeing an action plan for these key priorities, with clear performance measures, timescales and senior level responsibilities will help drive forward improvements and monitor progress.

**5. Develop and agree a strategy for future ways of working to bring together levers to reinforce cultural change.**

Developing and integrating plans around hybrid working, staff accommodation, communication and HR policies will ensure they all align with and support SKDC's future organisational vision.

## People Management and Capacity

- 6. Double-down on workforce engagement to strengthen two-way information flows - keep doing it until messages get through and behaviours are proactively demonstrated.**

Finding the right ways to engage with different staff groups, identifying the points at which top down and bottom-up messages break down, and investing in internal communications and new technologies will strengthen two-way information flows.

- 7. Address critical resource gaps, particularly around HR, and any 'single points of failure'.**

More collaborative working through multi-disciplinary teams and capturing learning will help to protect corporate memory and reliance on a small number of individuals. These will ensure SKDC has the capacity to continue delivering on its ambitions.

## Change and continuous improvement

- 8. Put in place a resourced communications plan with strong linkages to the corporate centre.**

This resource investment and strategic planning will enable SKDC to reinforce corporate messages, organisational values and behaviours, and facilitate two-way communication.

- 9. Deliver some quick successes to help win hearts and minds, such as:**

- Progress the review of report writing and approval process.
- Improve intranet offer including up-to-date staff directory with contact details of who works in each team.
- Make specific service improvements and address staff suggestions (e.g. uniforms, equipment etc.)

- 10. Try to draw a line under the past and have confidence in the path the Council is on.**

Continue building on the achievements already made and the direction that has been taken - trust, engagement and results will follow.

## Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank SKDC for undertaking the LGA Bespoke Remote Peer Support sessions.

The Peer Team look forward to continuing to support SKDC on their journey, the next element of which will be an action planning workshop in which SKDC can share their emerging plans for taking forward their 'people' priorities informed by this feedback report. The Peer Team will offer external challenge and reflections on SKDC's plans, as well as tangible examples and reflection on scenarios and tips from their own experiences.

This will be followed by an onsite Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2021.

## Signposting

Annex A signposts to resources and case studies that may be helpful in informing SKDC's development of its programme of activities.