

# **Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review**

**Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council**

**16 October 2023**



## 1.0 Executive summary:

The LGA completed a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) between 1 and 4 November 2022. The findings from this CPC showed how the Council is an 'impressive organisation' based upon the political maturity of Groups working in the context of no-overall-control, the strength of local relations, financial planning, and governance.

Alongside recognising these organisational strengths, the Peer Challenge Team also delivered eleven recommendations to further support improvement at SMBC. Some of these recommendations were designed to safeguard and embed the Council's current strengths, whilst others were designed as 'stretch targets' to help the Council with their ambitions for the future. The Peer Team was pleased to hear the positive impact ('immensely impactful') that this peer challenge has had for SMBC, and the benefits of the process which the Council communicated.

The positive engagement of SMBC with the Peer Challenge process has been illustrated in the council's clear and structured response to the peer team's recommendations. This includes the development and implementation of a CPC Action Plan, as well as a summary update on progress provided to the Peer Team ahead of the Progress Review. This, alongside the availability of the political and managerial leadership for the full-day revisit speak to the structure and priority that SMBC have given to improvement and this process.

The original CPC of SMBC highlighted the effective relationships that exist both within SMBC through Members and Officers, as well as across political groups. These positive relationships also exist with external organisations who recognised and praised the role, approach, and contribution of the Council. From conversations across stakeholders it is clear to the Peer Team that these positive relationships remain in-place at the point of this Progress Review.

A significant development for Stockport Council since the original CPC were the local elections in May 2023. The last all out elections were held 20 years ago, and therefore, this set of all out elections had the potential to bring significant change. The Outcome of the election was that the Council remains in no-overall control, with the Liberal Democrats remaining the largest party with 30 seats (gaining one), and Labour remaining the second largest party with 24 seats. The election also saw the loss of the five Conservative seats on the Council, and a rise in the number of local, Independent, and Green seats, including the Independent Ratepayers and Edgeley Community Association. Whilst the political settlement across the Groups remains similar, it is noted that there has been change in some role (e.g., Scrutiny Chairs), as well as a significant cohort of new Councillors.

Positively, the Peer Team recognise that that the strengths identified through the original CPC continue to be reflected in the performance of many council service areas. As part of the Progress Review, the Peer Team considered the performance of key Council Services in comparison to other Metropolitan areas through the use of the LG Inform tool, which highlighted:

- A Council Tax collection rate of 97.6% - which is the third best rate for a Metropolitan Council in the UK and above the national average of 94%.
- Low levels of children classed as not in education, employment, or training at 2.8%, the second best performing Metropolitan Council.
- The fourth lowest levels of Looked After Children (72 per 10,000 compared to a national average of 95 per 10,000) (the council were rated 'good' by Ofsted prior to the original CPC in April 2022).
- The best performing Metropolitan Council nationally for levels of household waste, and rates of household recycling.

The feedback provided to the Council through this Progress Review included praise for the Council's response to recommendations on organisational development, dynamic financial modelling evidenced through the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy, and the structure and content of the Council's new member induction programme following the all-out elections. The body of this report highlights more specific detail regarding the work of Stockport Council over the past 12-months but speak to a culture of an organisation that is engaged and invested in continuous improvement.

Inherent to the Peer Challenge process is the responsibility of the Peer Team to provide considerations that could support the council going forward, as set out in the body of this report. This includes continuing to refine the council's approach to neighbourhood working to maximise the input of elected members, and considerations for the Council's Performance Management Framework to support the delivery and oversight of the Council's ambitions.

## 2.0 Background:

Central to the effectiveness of the Corporate Peer Challenge process is ongoing engagement with Councils. This enables the LGA to maintain dialogue over the issues and recommendations presented to the Council during the Peer Team's time onsite, and support organisations in responding effectively through locally developed and owned Action Plans.

In this context, CPC Progress Reviews are designed to support this ongoing engagement, taking place within a year of the Peer Team's time with the Council. In Stockport, the

timeline for this work saw the Peer Review completed in November 2022, with the CPC report published alongside the Council's Action Plan in February 2023. These reports were presented by the Council at the public meeting of their Corporate Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee, illustrating the transparency and political engagement throughout the process.

This Progress Review has been completed within a year of the Team's original time onsite, and presents the opportunity to re-engage with Stockport Council, discuss the progress made with recommendations, any key changes in operating context, as well as further areas for consideration and ongoing improvement. This Progress Review was designed to build on previous findings and discussions, rather than replicating previous work or incorporating new lines of enquiry.

To support this Progress Review, a scope was agreed with Stockport Council that clustered the Teams' previous findings into a number of key themes and considered the necessary stakeholders for the Peer Team to meet during a physical revisit to the Council on Monday 16 October 2023.

### 3.0 Peer team, Scope, and Context:

The original CPC in November 2022 was supported by eight Officers and Councillors. The full report from the Peer Team is available on the LGA [website](#) here and was also published by Stockport Council alongside their [Action Plan](#) for improvement. For this progress review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- **Chris Naylor:** Lead Peer (Inner Circle, previously Birmingham City Council).
- **Cllr Richard Kemp:** Liberal Democrat Member Peer (Liverpool City Council)
- **Cllr Simon Henig:** Labour Member Peer (Durham Council)
- **Shaun Darcy:** Director of Finance, Corporate Landlord & Assurance (Walsall Council)
- **Sonia Halliwell:** Director of Customer and Transformation (Wigan Council)
- **Alison Edwards:** Shadow Peer, Adviser (LGA)
- **Matthew Dodd:** Peer Challenge Manager (LGA)

In advance of the progress review, an updated action plan, produced by the council, was shared with the peer team. This outlines the progress made in relation to the eleven key recommendations made in the CPC. This document contained a clear overview of the Council's response to the Peer Team's findings, the Council's progress

to-date, and their intentions and plans. This document was clearly set-out and contained extensive detail on the Council's response to the CPC findings, with this in-mind, the Peer Team would encourage this to be published alongside this report to support cross-referencing.

The Peer Team spent a full day onsite for this Progress Review. This included a scene setting meeting to consider changes in context, 1-2-1 interviews with the Council Leader, Leader of the Opposition, and Chief Executive, as well as meetings with other Group Leaders. The team also completed three focus groups, which included approximately fifteen officers. The key findings and feedback of the Progress Review was shared with Senior Political and Managerial Leaders of the Council through a facilitated conversation at the end of the day.

The original Corporate Peer Challenge made a series of recommendations to support the Council's ongoing improvement journey (these are contained in full in Appendix 1.0 to this report). For the purposes and structure of this report, these have been clustered under the following themes and headings:

- **Theme One: Transformation and New Ways of Working:** This includes the recommendations regarding alignment of the transformation programme to the Council's budget, and the continuation of neighbourhood and partnership working.
- **Theme Two: Governance:** This theme was structured to build on the recommendations regarding the Council's Constitution, the development of a member induction programme, and Committee Reports.
- **Theme Three: Internal Processes:** This final theme includes wider issues regarding finance, Organisational Development, and communications.

Whilst this Progress Review focuses on the progress made against the Council's Action Plan, it also allows consideration of changes in the Council's operating environment over this time. This can often mean new opportunities or challenges, or wider changes in context since the team were last onsite. As part of this review the Council provided further information on this context, this included the outcomes of the all-out Borough elections in May 2023. Finally, it is recognised that many of the Team's previous recommendations to Stockport were structured over the medium to long-term, therefore, it is recognised that this review takes place at a 'point in time' and it was appreciated that the Council's updated Action Plan was divided to show progress to-date alongside their plans for the future, demonstrating clarity and phasing to the Council's focus on improvement.

## 4.0 Transformation and New Ways of Working:

Under this theme, consideration was given to the activity and progress of the Council against the following three recommendations. These recommendations are listed in full in Appendix 1.0, but are summarised below at a headline level:

- Consider the council's transformation programme to ensure full alignment to the One Stockport Borough Plan.
- Maximise the benefits of neighbourhood / area working in the borough.
- Explore future opportunities to work with local partners and build on existing relationships.

The original CPC recognised the strong track-record of Stockport Council in delivering transformation, as illustrated through the achievement of agreed budget savings as well as external awards from the Local Government Chronicle and Municipal Journal.

A key recommendation from the Peer Team was for Stockport to continue and build on this work, using transformation as a lens for developing and designing new approaches to service delivery. The Council has responded positively to this ambition through a number of key activities. This includes reviewing the transformation programme and considering further opportunities for collaboration across the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, including the use of five-year and ten-year goals and outcomes to shape longer-term planning. Through this Progress Review the Peer Team were informed of the alignment between the Council's Medium-Term Financial Plan and Transformation Plan, which will support the organisation in addressing the financial challenges facing the wider sector.

Beyond the content of the Transformation Programme, the Council has supported an effective framework through the implementation of a Transformation Steering Group (established in March 2023), the strengthened use of Smartsheet reporting to track interdependencies and progress across the organisation, as well as the further mobilisation of the One Stockport Partnership to support joint approaches on long-term objectives.

Central to the Council's transformation goals is the Council's approach to Neighbourhood working. The Peer Team was impressed at the 'sophistication' of this work, and how it incorporated a mixture functions which peers had seen in other locality models individually, but not brought together to this extent. This includes engagement through workshops, early intervention services such as Family Hubs, as well as place-based services.

The Peer Team appreciates that the nature of a one-day progress review through interviews and desktop work limits seeing this work in-practice but can see that this work will be central to the organisation going forward and is reflected in the importance of these themes in



Stockport's Council Plan. The Team's discussion and feedback on this work reflected the complexity of balancing instances when the Council will need to work at a neighbourhood level, and when the Council will need to work as One Stockport, including the contribution of elected members across these different levels.

Finally, the Peer Team previously provided positive feedback regarding the strength of local partnerships, and the convening approach of SMBC. Through this Progress Review, the Peer Team heard about the pride which the Council has for these relationships and how they are reflected through the co-creation of the One Stockport Borough Plan. The Council has made further progress with partnership working over the past year, including the delivery of three 'annual summits' to bring partners together around agreed issues. The Council has also developed a Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector Alliance (meeting in November 2023) with an underpinning strategy which was launched in July 2023. Alongside this work the Council has reviewed a number of key partnership forums, to consider issues of governance, terms of reference, membership, and performance. This approach will support the Council to maintain effective relationships with partners across a range of issues and will enable these partnership arrangements to accommodate changes in context and need that may emerge. The team appreciate that this work is being taken forward through the One Stockport, One Future Plan which sets out the next phase of partnership working for the borough plan in the delivery of five key objectives, known locally, as 'the five big things'.

## 5.0 Governance:

Under this theme, consideration was given to the activity and progress of the Council against the following three recommendations. These recommendations are listed in full in Appendix 1.0, but are summarised below at a headline level:

- Develop a comprehensive member development programme for May 2023.
- Review the length and structure of reports to councillors.
- Review the council's constitution and working practice to bring in-line with sector norms.

The original Corporate Peer Challenge had highlighted the '*respectful relationships which exist across the Council*'. The Peer Team recognised that the Council's all-out elections in May 2023 could potentially bring significant changes, and therefore encouraged the Council to consider the support to new and returning members to maintain these existing relationships and systems. The Peer Team was pleased to see the extensive programme of support that was offered to councillors through the Corporate Induction Programme. This programme included 21 internal sessions delivered by the Council, and access to externally facilitated sessions. It is clear that the Council has put a great deal of thought and capacity into this area, with sessions being structured as a mixture of induction, all-member briefings, and bespoke sessions, with some mandatory sessions linked to specific Committees. This

intensive work will act as a strong foundation that will benefit the Council over the coming years, and the organisation is mindful of ongoing opportunities for further development including offers available through external partners.

Central to the governance culture of any organisation are the written reports which are used to share information across officers and members. The Peer Team had no concerns regarding the quality of reports, or the processes for their development and approval, but recognised the innate tension that existed between summarising salient points and providing sufficient detail. Therefore, it is a positive development that the Council has set up a Working Group to consider best practice across the sector and the roll-out of training for staff.

The Council has also committed to reviewing their Constitution in the next municipal year and has established a working group to lead on this work, agreeing that this process will consider best practice elsewhere in the sector. This will build on the recent improvements that the Council made in 2019, incorporating updates to the Code of Conduct and Standards in Public Life.

Finally, a recurring theme within this Progress Review was the issue of ‘assurance’ across the local government sector. This reflected the introduction of the Office of Local Government, as well as inspections of Health and Social Care Services. In this context, the Peer Team were pleased to hear that the Council has taken a pro-active approach to engaging with these issues, reflected in the internal discussions held across Corporate Leadership Team to consider financial and governance issues reported elsewhere in the sector.

## 6.0 Internal Processes:

Under this theme, consideration was given to the activity and progress of the Council against the following five recommendations. These recommendations are listed in full in Appendix 1.0, but are summarised below at a headline level:

- Develop a wider use of dynamic modelling to support increased dialogue on the financial context of the council post 2025:
- Continue to develop the contribution of organisational development towards the council’s transformation objectives:
- Further develop the council’s approach to becoming an ‘employer of choice’ in the sub-region:
- Introduce a monthly statutory officers meeting.
- Communicate the council’s work and progress more widely:



During this Progress Review, the Peer Team reflected that it was pleasing to hear the Council was *'unashamedly focused on doing the basics well'*. This is reflected in the Council's financial management and strong financial position compared to many others in the sector, as illustrated through the setting of balanced budgets, the achievement saving targets, and underspends in recent financial years.

The Peer Team encouraged the Council to continue with the processes and systems which have served them well but encouraged the use of dynamic modelling to support dialogue across the organisation regarding their medium-term financial context. To this end, the Council has continued with the regular updates of assumptions and scenario planning. The Council approved an update to their Medium-Term Financial Plan in February covering the three-year period of 2024/25 to 2026/27. Internally, the Council has rolled over their assumptions to have a five-year internal version through to 2029/30. The Council is considering extending their external document but recognises the associated caveats of uncertainty regarding local government funding and wider national economic issues. The Council has also maintained the effective process of engaging with Cabinet and Scrutiny on the development of proposals, with the Council having a clear and robust plan for a balanced budget position in 2024/25.

Reflecting wider challenges in the sector, with 90% of authorities reporting challenges in recruitment and retention of staff, the Peer Team encouraged the Council to develop their approach to being an employer of choice, building on the opportunity presented through the redevelopment of Stopford House. The Peer Team was provided with an update on the work of 'ambitious Stockport' brand and associated work, which has included recruitment videos, the use of specialist social media, and redevelopment of webpages, as well as running a jobs fair in September which was attended by 700 people, and the piloting of locality-based jobs fairs. The Council is committed to continue to build on these successes and recognises the importance of these areas of work.

The Council have also recently completed an all-staff survey. This will provide an important feedback loop which will support work in this area and enable benchmarking and progress against last years' survey. Whilst the results of this survey were not available at the time of this Progress Review, the Peer Team are encouraged by the increased response rate compared to last year. Peers recognise that the Council completed over 200 actions informed through the previous survey and would encourage the Council to continue with this process of continual engagement, review, and improvement.

Alongside these issues, the Peer Team previously encouraged the Council to consider how Organisational Development could best support the next phase of the Council's transformation. The Council has a clear and embedded People Plan to support this work and has been able to demonstrate progress on issues of recruitment, as well as launching a

Leadership Development Programme in January 2023, as well as senior managerial sponsorship for Employee Engagement Groups. The progress in this area is visible through the positive response to the 2023 Staff Awards as well as reductions in staff absence rates (which has been well supported by the Council's Wellbeing Hub). Collectively this progress has demonstrated a purposeful and targeted approach which will support the Council moving forward. This is complimented by a visible 'on the ground' approach from both the Leader and Chief Executive to connect with staff and workforce across the Council.

The original CPC highlighted the 'positive relationships' that exist at Stockport Council across statutory officers at the Council. The Peer Team was pleased to hear that this has been further embedded through the introduction of a monthly statutory officers meeting, and with the addition of the Monitoring Officer attending the Council's Corporate Leadership Team, supporting increased engagement on wider issues, and supporting further engagement on the Council's Forward Plan and Key Decisions ahead of publication.

The final recommendation from the original CPC was that the Council should communicate their work more widely. The Council has recruited an Assistant Director of Communications, demonstrating the increased capacity that they have put into this area, and the launch of the reputation and influencing programme and Communication Action Plan. The Council provided the Peer Team with several examples of press coverage of their work, including positive coverage in the trade press, as well as recognition in national media outlets including the Guardian and Times. This work has been accompanied by the Mayoral Development Corporation discussing their work on national radio.

## 6.0 Summary, Considerations and Next Steps:

The Peer Team would like to re-iterate their gratitude to Stockport Council for the engagement with the Corporate Peer Challenge process, and for the capacity that the organisation has put into responding to the CPC findings. The Council communicated to the Peer Team that the findings from the original Peer Challenge have been helpful in supporting the organisation's actions over the past 12-months and have supported the Council with their improvement.

The Peer Team appreciate that the Council have well established processes and mechanisms for taking forward this work and as the Council continues to progress through their structured Action Plan the Peer Team would encourage Stockport Council to consider the following issues as they progress.

- **Focus on Equality:** The Peer Team recognise that Stockport's Council Plan is built around 'creating opportunities for everyone' and includes the priority to support those who need it most. Given the breadth the scale, ambition, and breadth of work that the

Council is leading, the team reflected there is a risk that the focus on equality could potentially be diluted.

- **Neighbourhood Working:** The emerging neighbourhood working model in Stockport is an exciting development for the Council that provides a new approach to informing, shaping, and delivering services. The Peer Team believes that ensuring that the contribution of Councillors is maximised in this model will further support this work further.
- **Performance Management Framework:** The Council set-out they are completing further work on the development of appropriate measures to monitor performance against the Council Plan. The team would encourage them to consider the best measures / indicators to reflect their priorities. There is also a need to consider the process for reporting these indicators, including consideration of appropriate size of number of metrics, and distinguishing between publicly reporting progress against priorities against the internal use of management information.

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings. To support transparency, the council is advised to publish this note. Claire Hogan, the LGA's Principal Advisor for the North West can be contacted by: [Claire.Hogan@Local.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.Hogan@Local.gov.uk)

## Appendix 1.0. Full list of previous recommendations from Corporate Peer Challenge:

Replicated below is a complete list of the Recommendations which the Peer Team presented to Stockport Council through their Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2022.

- **Recommendation One: Consider the council’s transformation programme to ensure full alignment to the One Stockport Borough Plan:** The council has a strong track-record of delivering service improvement and financial savings. The One Stockport Borough Plan presents an opportunity to consider the council’s approach to transformation to support wider reimagined service offers, and the peer team would encourage the council to be ‘confident’ and ‘brave’ in their development to build on this track-record, and the potential for it to be applied in other service areas.
- **Recommendation Two: Maximise the benefits of neighbourhood / area working in the borough:** The council has a strong history of working at a neighbourhood level through the team around the place approach, their Area Committees, and the Stockport Family Model. There is potential to build on these foundations by ensuring that their capacity is aligned to the council’s priorities and supporting community input into developing new ways of working. This has the potential to be central to the council’s approach to addressing inequality and supporting the development of new ways of working across the organisation (and with wider partners) but will require consideration regarding the relationships of these forums and programmes.
- **Recommendation Three: Develop a wider use of dynamic modelling to support increased dialogue on the financial context of the council post 2025:** The council should develop their existing modelling to account for changing financial pressures, such as inflation, cost of living, and increased demand. This modelling should support increased dialogue and discussion across officers and members regarding the council’s longer-term financial response. Ultimately, this modelling should be used to support a three-five-year Medium Term Financial Plan that captures these assumptions, and provides a framework for their revision, as well as enabling transformation through cross-cutting and organisational wide approaches.
- **Recommendation Four: Develop a comprehensive member development programme for May 2023:** With the council having their first all-out elections in May 2023, there is potential that there will be a new intake of Councillors. In this context, the council needs to develop a robust member induction programme to support new and returning members with the appropriate skills and knowledge for their roles.
- **Recommendation Five: Review the council’s constitution and working practice to bring in-line with sector norms:** The council should consider the practice, procedures and processes which are attached to the Council’s constitution to make

sure that they reflect standard practice across the sector. This could include ensuring clarity of terms, ease of navigation, and appropriate approaches on member and public questions.

- **Recommendation Six: Continue to develop the contribution of organisational development towards the council’s transformation objectives:** The council’s People Plan has supported staff well through the pandemic. The council should build on this progress to consider how OD capacity can be brought together to align workforce practice, including workforce engagement and communication, professional development, and the contribution the workforce can make to the transformation journey, focusing on the priority issues of addressing health inequality, inclusive growth, and creating opportunities for residents.
- **Recommendation Seven: Further develop the council’s approach to becoming an ‘employer of choice’ in the sub-region:** The council has an impressive track record in this area (including progress made through digital recruitment, local presence, and OD culture) and to build on this should look to align their response to the findings from their 2022 staff survey with the opportunities of new ways of working through the newly redeveloped Stopford House to support the continued recruitment and retention of high-quality staff.
- **Recommendation Eight: Explore future opportunities to work with local partners and build on existing relationships:** The council should build on the strong relationships and systems that it has with partners. and continue explore what is needed to further these relationships, as well as explore new areas where relationships could bring wider benefits to residents. Partners have encouraged the council to work ‘confidently’ in this space.
- **Recommendation Nine: Introduce a monthly statutory officers meeting:** The council would benefit from the ‘golden triangle’ of statutory officers (chief executive, Section 151 officer, and monitoring officer) meeting monthly to support shared approaches to risk and increased communication on their management, and formally build on the positive relationships that are in-place.
- **Recommendation 10: Review the length and structure of reports to councillors:** The council would benefit from reviewing the length and content of reports presented to committees, ensuring that they are concise and contain executive summaries. The council may wish to consider the training implication for staff on this issue.
- **Recommendation 11: Communicate the council’s work and progress more widely:** Recognising the strength of practice that exists locally, SMBC should consider how they can share their practice with the wider sector. The council should also consider how their aims and progress is communicated to residents and groups. There is support available to the council through training and reviews which the LGA would be happy to support as appropriate.