


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Stoke-on-Trent City Council

12th December 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

Stoke-on-Trent City Council undertook a Local Government Association (LGA) corporate peer challenge across the four days from 23rd to 26th May 2022. The council published the related report on 19th July 2022.

A progress review is an integral part of the corporate peer challenge process. It is designed to provide the opportunity for a council to:

- Update peers on the progress made in relation to the recommendations made by the peer team and to receive feedback on this
- Consider the peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were on-site, including any further support needs
- Discuss impact and learning from the progress made to date

As was reflected upon at the start of the progress review session, the global and national context has clearly changed significantly since the time of the corporate peer challenge. This includes the conflict in Ukraine and its impacts; the growing cost of living crisis; changes at government level; and the state of the economy and the consequential impacts on council finances.

The LGA would like to thank Stoke-on-Trent City Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This progress review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with the LGA and sector-led support. Indeed the Leader is the Chair of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, which she reflected at the start of the session as being a huge honour for the whole council.

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at Stoke-on-Trent City Council took place remotely on the morning of Monday 12th December 2022. The following individuals, who formed the original peer team, were involved:

- Matt Jukes, Chief Executive, Hull City Council
- Councillor David Renard, Leader, Swindon Council
- Lynne Ridsdale, Deputy Chief Executive, Bury Council
- Rob Powell, Strategic Director for Resources, Warwickshire County Council
- Fiona Alderman, Head of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer), Haringey Council
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The Leader, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, the City Director and a number of senior management colleagues at Director and Assistant Director level participated in the session on behalf of the council.

The written feedback below is provided under the following four themes identified by the council and reflects the way in which the council sees things having progressed since the original corporate peer challenge:

- Children's and Young People's Priorities and Progress
- Economic Development and Civic Pride
- Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Organisational Culture and Improvement

3. Progress review - feedback

Children's and Young People's Priorities and Progress

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the council maintains the children's services improvement agenda as the absolute priority and ensures an unrelenting drive on this from across the council. The council emphasised that improving outcomes for children and young people in Stoke-on-Trent is the number one priority

for the organisation. This is reflected in the annual Operating Plan and Team Plans as a whole-council endeavour to transform outcomes for all children and young people, with an emphasis on those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The council outlined that it is working with the city's Education Challenge Board to maximise the benefits of the city's designation as a Priority Education Investment Area. It is also working with a range of partners to develop a Local Skills Improvement Plan aimed at transforming the life chances and aspirations of future generations of children.

Since the corporate peer challenge, the council has undergone an Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). This reported in late November this year and concluded that the overall effectiveness of the authority's children's services is 'requires improvement to be good' – which is a substantial improvement since the last inspection in February 2019 where services were found to be inadequate. The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers in the city were judged to have progressed to 'good' whilst services for vulnerable children and families were highlighted as having improved "substantially".

The inspection highlighted a "coordinated and relentless drive" for improvement around the children's social care agenda. Whilst the council is very aware that continued progress is required and there is much more to do, it is proud that the progress in children's services has been confirmed through the inspection process. It sees the inspection's findings as recognition of all the hard work that people have put in over the last few years, much of which has been delivered in the challenging context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Aspects key to continuing the improvement were outlined as being strengthening safeguarding partnership arrangements to meet the increasing need and emerging issues for the city and the stabilisation of the workforce against a backdrop of a national shortage of children's social care staff and the financial situation.

The council has also recently won two awards linked to children's social care:

- A team excellence award from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) relating to the work in transforming the 'front door' of children's services

- Being named ‘Fostering Friendly Employer of the Year’ – with Stoke-on-Trent as a place also being recognised as the UK’s first ‘Fostering Friendly City’

The annual report on the ‘Room to Grow’ children’s strategy will be published shortly. The council indicated this will reflect progress in key areas, such as reductions in infant mortality and maternal smoking – which whilst still higher than the national average are both progressing in the right direction.

There was a monitoring visit on adult education and post-16 education at the end of September 2022. This found that progress was being made in all areas.

The council outlined that recent exam results and Key Stage progress, whilst from a low base, demonstrate that education outcomes for children have remained consistent with those from 2019 and that they have improved in English and literacy, despite the challenges of the pandemic. The council’s benchmarking suggests that this contrasts with the situation experienced by statistical neighbours and regional neighbours and with the average for England.

One of the main risks facing the council is seen to be the level of demand in the social care system. A five per cent increase in referrals is being seen quarterly, whilst the number of children in care is unprecedented with 1,085 currently. The needs of children and young people are also becoming increasingly complex in nature. This is generating the requirement for a growing number of tailored solutions which is becoming unsustainable both in terms of the availability of provision and the cost. It also generates considerations for adult social care provision and cost as young people transition from children’s services. The council is seeking solutions here urgently and, within this, is considering establishing its own residential accommodation for children with disabilities and Tier 4 secure provision.

The council outlined a number of other key areas of focus linked to children’s services for the months and years ahead:

- Extending the council's role as a 'place influencer' through strengthened partnerships around the Integrated Care Board, education and community safeguarding and community safety.
- Ensuring demonstrable progress so that young people and adults are in education, employment or training – with the council indicating some emerging success having been seen but with more to do. The 'Be the Future' initiative was highlighted, which sees employers in the city pledging to provide work-based opportunities to young people that are currently in, or have left, the care of the council or are furthest from employment.
- Improving Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services and support.
- Capitalising upon the emerging model of Family Hubs in the city to develop and embed the council's approach to public health.

The peer team reflected that the progress that has been made, which has been confirmed through the ILACS, is a real credit to people in the council and partner organisations and is a huge achievement – particularly given the challenges of the pandemic. It should provide a major morale boost in the drive for further improvement.

Economic Development and Civic Pride

'Levelling Up' Stoke-on-Trent continues to be a key priority for the council and is strongly linked to the top priority of improving outcomes for children and young people in the city. The current economic situation, with the associated pressures on households and businesses, has emerged as an additional local priority which the council, with partners and stakeholders, has sought to respond to in a timely and focused way. The council explained that, in this context, the 'Levelling Up' focus is being applied to enabling the delivery of the city's headline development projects whilst simultaneously facilitating less prominent aspects of economic and social renewal, such as culture and heritage; the environment; skills; and residents' opportunities and aspirations.

The council outlined the Stoke-on-Trent City Forum as going from strength to strength as a mechanism for engaging partners and stakeholders across a wide variety of fields, sectors and policy areas. An event was due to be held later that same day exploring how to enable children and young people in the city to grow and progress. Next month will see a session looking at tourism and economic growth whilst future meetings will explore themes such as the work to build social capital in some of the city's most deprived neighbourhoods and the work and role of family support services.

The City Forum has also drawn partners and stakeholders together to discuss and shape plans for the 'Stronger Together Through Winter' programme. This is based on the priorities and values of the council's 'Stronger Together' strategic vision. The approach is to promote forms of support already available, plus others as they emerge from government, and repurpose existing spaces and programmes to provide additional help and support. So far, there are 60 'welcoming spaces' that have been established, along with numerous foodbanks and warm clothing hubs. There are also a number of helplines for different types of needs and everything is signposted in one place through a public portal. The council highlighted the "especially magnificent" engagement and efforts of the voluntary and community sector and, more generally, the strength that is shown when the city works together towards the same goals.

A new partnership-based initiative is being established to consolidate the approach to economic growth. This is the 'Stoke-on-Trent Growth Company' which will be launching in the new year and providing a shared vision and approach encompassing business support; job creation; skills; inward investment; culture; and tourism. It will provide a single point of contact for stakeholders and, working with local partners, seeks to establish a more joined-up and holistic approach to securing strategically important outcomes from 'Levelling Up' and the city's economic resurgence. This resurgence is reflected in what the council highlighted as record employment levels, outstripping both national and regional figures, and the completion of half of the planned units for the Ceramic Valley Enterprise Zone.

The Leader explained that she continues to lobby and influence at the national level, including the council holding a very successful 'Levelling Up' Ministerial round table meeting in June which secured commitments from government departments and

national bodies to aid the delivery of the 'Powering Up Stoke-on-Trent' Prospectus. Clearly there have been Ministerial changes since but the council sees good foundations having been laid which will bear fruit.

The council outlined that progress with the city's 'Levelling Up' projects continues at pace, including the Goods Yard site currently undergoing rapid change and being on target for completion in early 2025. The Etruria Valley Link Road is in the final stages of completion and demonstrates the city's ability to deliver key infrastructure projects. It will connect the Ceramic Valley Enterprise Zone to the city's major road network and unlock a final phase of work at Etruria. A development partner is being appointed for the old Tunstall library and baths; planning applications have been submitted for the Crown Works and Spode development; and the flagship Etruscan Square regeneration project is gathering pace. Work is also taking place with the Home Office to bring over 500 skilled jobs to the city through the creation of a new Home Office Innovation Centre.

The council has entered into a landmark 'informal partnership agreement' with Homes England which creates a commitment to working jointly over the next five years on a comprehensive housing delivery plan for continued quality housing growth in the city. This follows the housing strategy launched by the council in March aimed at securing an appropriate mix of housing development to meet residents' housing needs for the future. Consultation has just concluded on the future of ten tower blocks in the city, reflective of the council's intentions around undertaking a re-modelling of its housing stock.

The refurbished Grade II listed Victorian Tunstall Town Hall opened in September. This houses a new library and local centre and a children's centre, which will soon become a Family Hub. It also provides space for a local police presence and a number of council support functions, plus other rentable space that will enable income generation. It thus represents a tangible flagship for the evolving approach to locality working in the city.

The council outlined that a refreshed cultural strategy was adopted at the Cabinet meeting in September, along with a new strategy for the visitor economy. A new young people's education and skills strategy has also been put in place, focusing on increasing aspiration and educational attainment levels and enhancing the alignment

of education and skills provision with the current and emerging needs of employers in the city. Consultation on the transport strategy for the city is drawing to a conclusion and work will be progressing on delivering bus improvement plans.

A prospectus has been developed for the city's museums service, aiming to create an international centre for ceramics and enhance the civic museum and art gallery through the embracing of new technology. This was launched just a week ago to an audience including the Arts Council, Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund plus a number of influential philanthropists. This follows the city's designation by the Arts Council as a 'Priority Place' for investment and the recent announcement that nine national portfolio organisations will be working in the city, up from three, to double investment to over £6m to support culture and heritage. This all reflects the way in which culture and heritage have been placed central to driving 'Levelling Up' in Stoke-on-Trent.

The corporate peer challenge recommended the enhancing of engagement with residents, partners and staff generally – but also specifically in relation to the 'Stronger Together' and 'Powering Up Stoke-on-Trent' Prospectus and moving over time to strengthen the approach to community engagement in the city. It also recommended ensuring that what is being done through the strategy around 'Stronger Together' and the Prospectus is impacting positively to the greatest possible extent on the increasing socio-economic challenges in Stoke-on-Trent and that what is being delivered is communicated and made truly meaningful to people in the city and within the council.

The peer team asked how these recommendations are progressing and the Leader explained that engagement mechanisms are put in place on a project-by-project basis. Examples include the open day following the re-opening of Tunstall Town Hall; the event eight weeks ago for current and potential future stakeholders in the Goods Yard residential and leisure development; and the approach being taken with the local media to convey how the city is approaching provision for asylum seekers and rough sleeping. There is acknowledgement that community engagement and communications activity need to progress further and the peer team would encourage the council to adopt a formal and regular feedback process to help support this.

The council's communications function has been enhanced through a recent appointment at Strategic Manager level. There was an offer from Matt Jukes for Hull City Council to work together with colleagues in Stoke-on-Trent around the approach to communications and influencing on the sensitive issue of asylum seeker provision.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the council:

- Map out how the financial gap will be addressed over the five years of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) – reflecting the specific actions required around savings and income generation
- Review the capital programme in light of macro-economic factors, inflation, revenue budget pressures and recent slippage in the delivery of the programme, re-prioritising as appropriate

The council outlined that it has responded in a variety of ways. This includes highlighting additional financial pressures and the impact on financial resilience through:

- A report to Cabinet in July on inflation and the consequential impacts
- A presentation to the Strategy and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee, also in July, looking at the findings for the council from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Financial Resilience Index
- Sessions held for council staff in August providing background to the financial challenges facing the council and outlining how staff can engage in helping to address them

The council explained that it continues to maintain a five-year rolling MTFS. Demand and inflation pressures and funding forecasts are refreshed as the context and circumstances change.

The council's financial forecast has changed significantly since the budget was set in February 2022. The forecast out-turn for 2022/23 at the end of quarter two in September was an overspend of £8.5m, with this being a reduction of £2.6m from the first quarter. It was explained that stringent measures have been put in place in recent months to reduce spending. These controls are seen to have worked to a certain extent and have contributed to the reduction in forecast overspend. A case in point is the vacancy freeze, as is the drive to limit non-essential expenditure. In-year pressures are currently estimated as being around £7.7m.

Further savings proposals have been developed for the current year. Thinking is developing around the following years and the peer team see it as crucial for this to crystallise into clear savings plans to close the budget gap in years two to five of the MTFS. This is in a context of the council having a low level of reserves, which it is very conscious of.

The budget process for 2023/24 commenced in May and ran through the summer, with the senior political and managerial leadership working to determine savings options whilst the forecast and budget gap was continually being refined. Financial pressures amounting to £41.3m were originally identified, with more than half of this relating to inflation and the pay award plus £11.3m connected to increased demand around children's placements and adult social care. November saw the budget gap virtually closed, with the impact of funding and inflation announcements in the Autumn Statement assessed and modelled. Savings of £16.8m have been identified and the related budget development consultation is starting this month.

The council's Capital Programme and Asset Management Board was established in 2021, aimed at providing the necessary governance for monitoring the delivery of the capital programme. The council highlighted that the Board undertook a review of all the commitments within the capital programme and submitted reprofiling and amendment proposals aimed at ensuring it remains affordable in the light of rising inflation and interest rates. These proposals were approved by Cabinet in November and an update on the capital programme was presented at the Council meeting on 8th December.

Changes include the allocation of an additional £4.5m for market housing, site design and delivery; the re-profiling of six schemes including three 'Levelling Up' projects; reductions in eleven schemes; and the removal of two schemes totalling £3.3m. The council highlighted that the net result of these changes is a reduction in the General Fund borrowing requirement of £14.5m through to March 2024.

One of the key considerations in carrying out the review was the risk that capital investment secured through the 'Levelling Up Fund' and similar government funding pots is being devalued by inflation and the knock-on impacts in terms of construction and related costs. The council is seeking to use capital and revenue finance in combination to support the delivery of the city's growth ambitions in ways that balance risk and opportunity.

The council explained that in developing forecasts for each financial year through to 2027/28, 2025/6 currently represents the most crucial year in terms of the scale and nature of the challenge. Key areas of transformation have been identified that will be pursued over the coming years in order both to improve service delivery and generate the efficiencies needed to secure a strong and sustainable financial position. The types of areas of transformation that were highlighted were a new operating model for adult services, involving NHS colleagues; the 'Safety Valve' programme around SEND agreed with government, which remains on track but will be supplemented with an improvement programme; and what was outlined earlier in relation to the development of local options for children's residential care. Transformation in social care, both children's and adults, is seen by the council as crucial.

Making more efficient use of the council's estate in Stoke-on-Trent is an additional component of the authority's financial strategy. It was explained that a new asset management plan has been developed and approved by Cabinet which sets out how the estate can be used to support the implementation of new, more efficient and responsive working practices. This includes the rollout of locality working for some community-based services and the transition to agile and hybrid approaches for many office-based staff. The council's refreshed asset management plan is key within this. The council is also mindful of the difficult balancing act that needs to be struck when it comes to disposals in the current climate, identifying the optimum point for sale to maximise value for money.

Savings through transformation in customer services and support functions, through the use of digital, are also being pursued. Work on replacing the core HR and finance systems is underway and the council is looking to roll out PowerBI – all as part of its data strategy, cloud migration and digital road map. Lynne Ridsdale outlined the experiences in Bury, working with an external provider, around delivering transformation. One of the challenges has been seeking simultaneously to drive an improvement agenda and take out savings, with the way this plays out with staff. Securing the identified savings has proved a challenge given the fragmented nature of them as they are comprised of small elements of lots of individuals' roles. There was seen to be merit in Stoke-on-Trent and Bury linking up further around this in order to exchange learning and experiences.

Lynne also reflected that whilst public service integration in Stoke-on-Trent may be less advanced than the Greater Manchester model of unified public services, there is real potential for driving improvement and transformation focused on targeting resources to prevent demand and manage the impacts of fiscal restraint at a system level. She would be happy to share experiences around this too and the City Director highlighted that, as two 'Safety Valve' councils, there could be useful exchanges on that also.

The peer team were keen to explore the position in relation to the council's commercial ventures, Unitas and Fortior. The former delivers the repair and maintenance of council homes and public buildings in the city whilst Fortior exists to stimulate housing provision in Stoke-on-Trent. The council outlined that the Boards of both these arms-length companies have been strengthened in recent months. Work has also taken place to enhance the relationship between the two organisations. Each has what the council described as an exciting emerging pipeline programme, both outside and inside the Housing Revenue Account. The example was cited of the Lichfield Street development by Fortior, with all 350 apartments having been sold and a waiting list now established for any that may become available again.

The council sees both arms-length companies as "being in a good place". However, given the Council's challenging financial position and low levels of reserves, very careful ongoing monitoring of these companies and risks in the wider economic environment will be critical to ensuring they do not negatively impact frontline service

delivery. A question that also arises is what further potential they have to offer, including possibly in the area of the provision of residential social care given the agenda that the council is exploring there.

This element of the session concluded with the City Director reflecting the uncomfortable position the council finds itself in of not having any audited accounts since the financial year 2018/19. There are a series of reasons for this which are wrapped up with the Auditors themselves and which the council has been seeking to see resolved as a matter of urgency, with escalation where feasible. One reason is a specific correspondence item still to be closed out; another is an issue at the national level relating to infrastructure valuation; and a third is Auditor capacity and resource. There is a very clear council commitment to this matter from the very highest level.

Organisational Culture and Improvement

The corporate peer challenge recommendations for the council included:

- Developing more 'distributed leadership' managerially and fostering a culture of greater accountability, devolved decision-making and responsiveness – with the need to establish a comprehensive managerial and leadership development programme
- Creating the necessary space and time for the senior leadership of the council, politically and managerially, to consider the strategic challenges facing the city and the organisation
- Developing understanding of the organisational principles and values that have been established and using these to drive change in the organisation
- Having a rigorous focus on 'improvement' over the next twelve months that draws in learning from across the sector
- Developing a stronger corporate core

The council outlined that it has progressed the implementation of a new workforce and organisational development strategy aimed at enabling the authority to adapt to the evolving landscape in which it operates and embrace new ways of working, collaboration and accessing local services. The council is seeking to create an organisational culture which supports continuous learning and improvement and the delivery of the council's transformation programmes, with the ultimate objective being to enhance outcomes for staff, the organisation and the wider city. The strategy places the 'Stronger Together' vision and values at the heart of the way the organisation functions.

Work is taking place on new approaches to embedding the organisational principles and values across all areas of the council's workforce and encouraging conversations about how these can inform the delivery of more effective and efficient services for local residents and businesses. The strategy is seen to pave the way for a radical overhaul of recruitment practices and the approach to rewarding, retaining and developing staff.

The council said they felt they had made considerable progress in recent months in relation to the devolution of decision-making from the Strategic Management Team (SMT) to other tiers of management. The autumn saw the introduction of an 'Annual Assurance Conversation' aimed at managers with delegated authority for budgets, decisions and/or staffing. It is designed to facilitate dialogue with their line managers around needs and expectations and focuses on such core topics as financial management; risk management; performance and improvement; governance and decision-making; procurement and contract management; business continuity; and data protection and Freedom of Information.

The conversation is intended to set the culture and tone of what is expected of managers in discharging their responsibilities. It is also a way for the line manager to gain assurance; identify peoples' development needs and other issues that need to be considered and addressed; and determine whether decision-making and responsibilities have been delegated to the correct level.

The council indicated it has revised its management learning and development offer but is conscious there is more to do here, particularly to benefit the middle management tier. A new training course has been launched for staff aspiring to be

managers in order to enable them to gain an understanding of the skills, qualities and values required to become an effective manager in the organisation. The course, which is being delivered at several venues city-wide to maximise accessibility, is fully booked up well into 2023.

At Strategic Manager level, a talent management approach has been introduced to develop and grow senior managers in a structured way that supports succession planning and targets leadership development. The initial phase has taken place through the autumn and planning is underway to identify appropriate support and development activities relevant to the outcomes. Some of these outcomes have been very positive, identifying people performing well and having high potential, whilst others have been much more challenging. Change will follow in due course, through a combination of people progressing to the next level and others moving on from the organisation, creating opportunities for existing staff and for bringing in new talent. Development opportunities are also being explored for those identified as performing well but content to remain in their existing role.

The talent management approach will be extended to other layers of the management structure in due course, with the key challenge being ensuring its consistent application. This could usefully sit alongside the objective of every member of staff having a Personal Development Plan – which the council explained progress is being made on but around which there is still more to do.

The council described the way in which individual directorates have adopted a new approach to staff engagement. This includes a series of directorate conferences during October and November and directorate newsletters. Both have emphasised how directorates need to be shaped by, and work towards, the ‘Stronger Together’ vision and priorities. Staff have been asked to consider how the various elements of their directorate relate to each other and devise solutions to real challenges facing the organisation.

The City Director explained how he has delivered a number of staff engagement events over the last couple of months, with six face-to-face sessions around the city and three online events. The council is proposing changes to workforce terms and conditions, making meaningful staff engagement crucially important. The aim of the sessions has been to give as many staff as possible the opportunity to hear about the

proposals, set in a context of current priorities and challenges. This will be the first time since 2008 that terms and conditions have been reviewed and the council is being assisted in this by West Midlands Employers. Trade union and staff views are being sought on proposals that aim to save £1m. The council rightly acknowledges that this will be a challenging agenda for the organisation which will require extremely careful handling.

The council is currently developing a new operating model for implementation next year. This essentially involves a shift to being an 'enabling organisation' with a smaller core focused on commissioning and strategy, with delivery at arms-length through a range of vehicles around which there would be pragmatism in their design. Delivering reform in the council's commissioning arrangements and developing the necessary capacity there will be crucial to the success of this approach. Rob Powell explained that Warwickshire made a similar shift four years ago and would be willing to share their experiences and learning around this, building on the work already taking place between his team and colleagues in Stoke-on-Trent around transformation.

The council highlighted the following additional areas of activity linked to organisational development that are either progressing or are on the agenda:

- The Operating Plan and Team Plans are seen to be becoming part of the organisational culture. A progress check is taking place in the new year around the 58 commitments given in Team Plans around contributing to the children's improvement agenda.
- Good progress is felt to have been made in developing performance measures at the strategic, operational and directorate levels, including the development of 'surrogate measures' aimed at predicting whether longer-term outcomes in areas such as SEND and adults were likely to see improvement.
- There is more to do on recruitment and retention and the pay and grading structure. Skills shortages are really being felt in certain areas within the organisation, such as strategic finance, Planning and regeneration. One of the reasons for the planned pay and grading review is to look at developing market differentials in order to aid recruitment and retention in such areas.

Rob Powell encouraged the council to be mindful of the new skills that will be required under the new operating model and ensure that they are being brought in.

- Targeted restructures are planned in the new year for education and learning; skills and employment; regeneration; assets; facilities management; housing management; and children's social care.
- A refresh of the mental well-being strategy for the city is planned and this will link to organisational culture work and the well-being offer to staff.
- SMT awaydays are creating the time and space for shared future planning.

The peer team reflected that there was a huge amount going on around organisational development and workforce. The City Director explained that clear prioritisation is being applied, with seven key areas to progress having been agreed. That inevitably means that some areas will have to wait until further down the line to be addressed.

The session concluded with the City Director indicating the council feels it continues to be relentless in the drive to improve the city's fortunes; it has the clear strategy, huge ambition and strong leadership required to deliver; there is continued momentum and that good progress can be seen on many fronts. The most significant risk is seen to be the impact of social care demand on the financial position of the authority.

Matt Jukes responded by indicating he and the rest of the peer team could relate strongly to the challenges being faced by the council and that there were many good things going on. He reiterated the point around the improvement in children's services being a huge achievement. Councillor David Renard reflected that a lot of progress was being made at pace. He raised the question of whether the focus will start to shift in the lead-up to the forthcoming elections. The Leader emphasised that the council will continue to drive things forward over the coming months and that difficult decisions will need to be taken both prior to and post the elections. She highlighted the revision of terms and conditions as an area which there is

determination to progress, rather than seeing them being deferred. The City Director highlighted the way in which officers are working to prepare appropriately for the different potential outcomes of the elections.

4. Moving forward and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Stoke-on-Trent City Council for its engagement in both the corporate peer challenge and the progress review. We recognise that the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will wish to reflect upon the findings and how to utilise them to support the council's improvement journey.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser for the West Midlands) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk