

# St Helens Borough Council

LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel

Key Reflections

28<sup>th</sup> September 2020



## Introduction

LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel sessions provide an opportunity for the Leader, Chief Executive, senior members and officers to come together, virtually, with peers to:

- Reflect on what the Council has achieved and learnt in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Discuss with peers the challenges and opportunities COVID-19 has presented for the Council and local area.
- Consider the steps the Council wishes to take towards recovery/renewal.

The sessions help to identify a series of steps the Council may wish to take as well as the further support and good practice available from across the sector.

On 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020, St Helens Borough Council undertook an LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel. Within the overarching theme of recovery and renewal, at the request of the Council the panel gave particular attention to how the Council intends to 'reset' existing ways of working.

The panel discussion involved the following participants:

- Cllr David Baines (Leader – St Helens Borough Council)
- Cllr Sev Gomez-Aspron (Deputy Leader – St Helens Borough Council)
- Kath O'Dwyer (CEX – St Helens Borough Council)
- Lisa Harris (Executive Director of Place Services – St Helens Borough Council)
- Cath Fogarty (Executive Director of Corporate Services – St Helens Borough Council)
- Sarah O'Brien (Executive Director of People's Services – St Helens Borough Council)
- Rob Huntington (Assistant CEX – St Helens Borough Council)
- Cllr Sir Stephen Houghton (Leader – Barnsley Council)
- Sarah Norman (CEX – Barnsley Council)
- Claire Hogan (Principal Adviser – LGA)
- Dan Archer (Programme Manager – LGA).

### Background to the LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel offer

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the commencement of 'lockdown' in March 2020, the 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 refocused its support and adopted a new remote approach.

'Recovery and Renewal Panels' do not replace LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and offer something distinctly different.

This work is there to primarily support improvement rather than providing concrete assurance and should be treated as such. This note acts a high level summary of the key reflections from the more detailed discussion.

## Key Reflections

This Recovery and Renewal Panel follows on from a tailored package of support provided by the LGA to the Council over recent years. Just some examples have included support for children's and adult services, finance, culture, communications as well as support for members and officers. One key area of this support was a Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2019. The lead peers from this peer challenge both returned for this Recovery and Renewal Panel and as such were able to reflect on changes since January 2019.

It is clear that since the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2019 a number of the recommendations have been acted upon. These have helped put the Council in a strong place to lead and deliver on a local reset post-COVID. Just some examples include the progress made in children's services (as highlighted in a recent OFSTED virtual monitoring visit), a movement to a 'One Council' approach, the addition of senior officer capacity and the further development of senior members. The Council are keen to continue this improvement journey, the pace of which is evident.

When looking just at the most recent period - since 'lockdown' began in March, an almost entirely new senior management team has been formed, the Council has led an extensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the wider improvement agenda has been progressed and the foundations have been set for organisational reset and recovery. In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, the Council have acted swiftly in taking on new roles and responsibilities to support residents and businesses through the pandemic. Just some examples of this have included:

- Registering 842 local volunteers to work alongside the Council in responding to COVID-19
- Delivering 1,275 food parcels to the most vulnerable
- Distributing £25m in grants to support local businesses (as at 29<sup>th</sup> June) and over 670,000 items of PPE to local care providers.

It does not however stop there. In addition to this, there are further examples where the Council has been prepared to innovate, modifying their approach to delivery and place leadership to support the overall local response. Just some examples of these include:

- Embracing the role that technology can play in building and maintaining relationships with children and families who are in contact with children's social care, which has included the use of video call technology.
- Supporting care leavers with key life skills sessions via Instagram – including DIY, cooking and keep fit sessions.
- Moving music and cultural education provision online and playing concerts in the grounds of care homes.
- Moving sports and library provision online – which has led to exercise videos being viewed 45,000 times online and a 2,000 person increase in online library membership.
- Raising an additional £85,000 from a local crowd fund initiative to help support the COVID-19 response effort in a variety of different ways. This has been just one feature of the #sthelentogether campaign, which the Council looks to build on further as a key component of how the Council operates in future. This is an example where the Council has demonstrated a much more proactive communications approach than in the past.

Through each of these, the Council has demonstrated an ability to innovate which it can increasingly mainstream across the Council, as part of a reset of how the Council chooses to operate and lead the Borough in future.

Key to this future, will be a new Borough Strategy which is due to be launched towards the end of the year. This will articulate how the Council and partners across the Borough will respond longer term to the challenges thrown down by COVID-19. The Council took the opportunity to engage on this with local stakeholders over the Summer period, both through online and via COVID safe means, within St Helens Town Centre. Central to this Borough Strategy is the intention to build further on the ways of working highlighted by #sthelenstogether. The Council wish to move forward with a new relationship with the community. This means working increasingly in tandem with the efforts of all local stakeholders including partners, the local voluntary, community, faith sector, local residents and the business community.

## Considerations

The following key themes emerged from the panel discussion which the Council may wish to give further consideration to as it progresses its approach to recovery/renewal or 'reset'

### **Defining, developing and embedding the new relationship with the local community and voluntary, community and faith sector**

The Council's #sthelenstogether branding appears to be gaining momentum. The Council have reflected on the way in which it engages with residents and have introduced new ways of communicating which have helped with this. These new ways of working have been seen through both an enhanced online and offline presence. Examples have included using locally specific content, [creating content which is more personal and emotive](#), as well as [embracing relevant, alternative local messengers](#). Just one impact of these efforts can be seen in the success of the earlier referenced #sthelenstogether [crowd funder campaign](#).

In developing the 'St Helens Together' approach, it is important to jointly explore the roles that the community, Council and other partners can play. This includes being clear about the appetite, capacity and capability of each partner, as well as the type of support they may need.

Co-design can lead to new and innovative ways of working, by amplifying and streamlining individual efforts. It can also encourage local partner advocacy and be used to share insight. This can come with a cost, which on occasion might mean a slower pace of 'delivery', albeit with often more sustainable solutions. Being cognisant of some of these trade-offs when working in this way will be important.

Championing the benefits and success from working in this way can help to build and sustain momentum. A consistent, visible message around the Council's expectation for this way of working likewise. Both will help to further "stitch in" this way of working across the Council and place. Senior members and officers will have an important role in both championing and modelling this.

## **Addressing the Council's pressing financial position**

The Council have identified a budget requirement of £20.4m for 2021/22. This is equivalent to around 13% of overall net revenue expenditure and presents a significant challenge. This follows a COVID cost and income pressure of £30.35m for 2020/21 – which equates to 19.4% of net revenue expenditure. The Council have received, to date, £13.2m of additional COVID funding, leaving a shortfall of £17.12m, before additional support for qualifying losses from fees and income are accounted as well as any other Government support which may be forthcoming.

The Council's General Fund Balances have reduced from £17.8m (in March 2019) to £9.3m (in March 2020). Part of which was due to a planned use of reserves, part of which was due to an overall overspend of £5.5m against the original 2019/20 budget. The Council has forecasted previously that these balances will reduce to £8.4m by March 2021, which is close to the CFO threshold of £8m. The Council recognise it cannot repeat this reliance in 2021/22.

Whilst further national funding announcements or other local adjustments could mean that the overall savings requirement for 2021/22 might change, the panel feedback that an approach of 'preparing for the worst whilst hoping for the best' may be the most suitable course of action. Given the Council has ambitions for significant transformation, in the event of better news regarding the budget for 2021/22, the Council may then have some space to invest into areas of work which fit with its transformation ambitions – accelerating delivery and increasing the chances of success. This also helps to minimise the risk of overspend in 2021/22.

The Council have committed to an Emergency Budget in Autumn 2020. Dealing with a budget requirement for 2021/22 of this amount will require tough decisions, which should be carefully made in line with the political priorities, statutory requirements and improvement needs. This includes ensuring children's services continue to be funded in a suitable way to support the continuation of improvement in this area from the current 'Inadequate' OFSTED judgement.

The Council are keen to use Value for Money comparisons on a service by service basis to help inform future spending decisions. The LGA will provide the Council with additional tools and support to inform this work.

It was clear from the members and officers at the session that there are clear ambitions to transform and modernise service delivery in St Helens. This includes utilising the corporate estate differently, as well as alternative digital solutions – building on the creative approaches demonstrated during 'lockdown'. Seeing the impact of such changes on the Council balance sheet can sometimes take time, and the Council is open to utilising some of their c£28m of capital receipts to create the space for this to happen. New ways of working and the level of organisational transformation will present different challenges – including for line managers – managing mobile teams, away from visible office presence and towards outputs and outcomes. More detail on support for organisational development is given below.

Once the budget for 2021/22 is agreed, it is important to look more widely at what is required to then see this delivered. In all councils, delivery of savings is a collective responsibility and is not the responsibility of the Chief Finance Officer alone. In 2019/20, the Council overspent against the budget in a number of service areas across the Council. Whilst there have been a number of changes at the Council since then, the Council should ensure that the underlying causes of this overspend and any mitigations that can help to prevent this overspend from happening again are put in place. Further support can be made available to the Council from the LGA with this. To further improve the Council's approach to financial management senior capacity in this area has been bolstered. This includes a Director of Finance and Assistant Director for Commercialisation. These posts are intended to support the transformation of the

Council and aid the improvement of financial management. Becoming more commercially active is an ambition of the Council. Support against this ambition has been identified by the LGA as a result of this panel discussion.

### **Enabling and supporting the types of transformation required**

In recent months the Council has shown a collective team spirit which has been focussed on a clear goal. In addition, the Council has committed to pursuing innovation, and has demonstrated a growing skill and confidence with communications. These are all important assets the Council can build upon in further growing a culture of innovation.

The Council has already begun to look at further investment in Organisational Development. This includes both support for members and officers and should be purposefully aligned to the ways of working the Council is looking to develop. Developing this programme further will mean reflecting on the distinctive roles of members and officers in this new way of working, as well as the implications of 'working with' rather than 'working for' local communities at a strategic and operational level. For middle managers, this may include how they manage mobile teams and understand their productivity whilst retaining an environment of empowerment. At a strategic level it should include being clear on the distinctive roles of senior members and officers as well as the roles that both Cabinet and ELT play in leading this way of working.

Aspects of the above include the role of recognition in spotlighting this way of working in action. This also includes the opportunities to share learning (from successes and failure) as well as the impact it has, where possible told through the voices of local people. The Council's skill in using effective communications outside the organisation as part of #sthelensstogether campaign can have a useful role, when applying these skills internally with the organisation and across partnerships.

Transitioning to a new way of working across the entire corporate body will not happen all at once and is an incremental journey. Ensuring the organisational development plan reflects the pace and requirements of this journey will be important for building and sustaining buy in, momentum and consistency.

Finally, ensuring that the amount and type of capacity is available to make the type of transformation required happen, will be important. This includes for both capital and revenue linked projects – particularly where the projects are larger in size or needing to be delivered at a much faster pace. A clearly costed plan, with considered milestones will help with this.

### **Capitalising on the opportunities available – health and social care**

The Council has seen the benefits from having an integrated health and social care arrangement in place when supporting the response to the pandemic. This includes the benefits from the single care record in enabling a more agile support response for vulnerable residents. There is specific learning here, and strong foundations within St Helens Cares which can now be built on further. There may be further opportunities to innovate that the Council can capitalise on linked to the integration of health and social care, building on the learning from the COVID-19 pandemic. Opportunities for innovation also exist looking beyond the model of more traditional long term care, building on examples such as the Brookfield Support Centre.

The People's Board have committed to a new People's Plan later this year which will build upon the lessons learnt from COVID-19 and identify a series of priorities aimed at supporting improvements in population health.

### **Adjusting to the opportunities available and challenges presented – place**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a well-documented national increase in home based, rather than office based working, online, rather than retail shopping and even if temporary – a reduction in events in town centre spaces. Whilst a recovery of footfall has been quicker in most town centres when compared to large city centres, what this will mean in the longer term is not yet certain. Given this, the Council has chosen to hold back on submitting the Town Deal Investment plan to allow further analysis of the new environment the Borough's town Centre will be operating in.

The Council is starting to develop a new relationship with the City Region and Combined Authority – seeing this 'very much a supportive partner'. As all areas begin the reset/recovery of their local economies, building further on this relationship will be important. This will include capitalising further on the opportunities to influence the strategic direction of the City Region. To help inform this direction, advocate on behalf of the local message and support others through the economic transition being faced, the Council has taken proactive steps to build its relationships further with local businesses. This includes increasing the opportunities for local businesses to support each other and developing the relationship with the St Helens Chamber. The ongoing and increased advocacy of local businesses will be important for realising the Council's economic ambitions for the borough, which means building on the St Helens Ambassadors work. This might also have a role in helping the business community to take a potential leadership role in #sthelenstogether.

Having the clear set of asks and opportunities to take to the City Region will remain important, as will be developing relationships with those in other sub-regions. This includes the opportunities in which the Council can lead, such as for the City Region in housing. A pipeline of projects based on the Council's ambitions will always remain important so that as opportunities present themselves, the Council is ready to move quickly in ways which are relevant to the needs of all of its communities. Included within which may be the roles of district centres, should increasing numbers sustain ways of living which keep them closer to home – whether that be for work or leisure.

### **Developing and delivering a compelling vision for localities based working that takes into account all of the above.**

The Council has ambitions to further develop its model of locality based working. This model may require different forms, in different parts of the borough which are based on the scale and nature of need, the amount of capacity available and the appetite of the local community. In this sense 'One Council' may not mean 'one size fits all' in all localities. The pathway to developing this may be shorter in some areas than others. In developing this way of working further, and in the spirit of #sthelenstogether, building on the role that ward councillors can play in the locality is a key aspect and may be a feature of the member development programme, highlighted above.

## In summary

The Council is progressing its improvement agenda at pace, the positive impacts of which are detailed throughout this report. With a new leadership team now formed, the foundations of an approach to reset and recovery established and a vision for a new way of working with the community emerging, the ingredients are in place for this to continue. Key to achieving all of this is addressing the budget challenge the Council now faces. This will require making tough decisions and ensuring these are delivered within agreed timescales with overspend avoided.

## Next steps

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. Claire Hogan (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the Council and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is [Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk)