


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge - Review

St Helens Borough Council

6 – 10 September 2021

Feedback report





1. Executive summary.....	3
2. Key recommendations .....	4
3. Summary of the peer challenge approach .....	5
4. Feedback .....	8
5. Next steps.....	22

# 1. Executive summary

St Helens Borough Council is in a far stronger position than it was at the time of the last Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in January 2019.

The 2019 CPC report highlighted that there were “Significant issues to tackle if the Council is to be successful moving forward”.

From this review it is clear that the Council has made a number of significant improvements and is well placed to capitalise on the firm foundations this has created.

The Leader and CEX of the Council have played a significant role in leading and sustaining this level of change, a particular achievement given how much change has been seen whilst the Council has been leading the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last 16 months. Both responding to and leading a recovery from this pandemic have created unprecedented challenges and demands upon councils across the country. The collaborative ‘#StHelensTogether’ way in which St Helens Borough Council has achieved and delivered this has been enthusiastically welcomed by partners across St Helens.

All considered, the pace of activity and organisational improvement demonstrated has been impressive and is a credit to members, officers and partners across St Helens. In leading this, the Council has been consistently open to and embraced external support from the LGA and those across the sector. Members and managers consistently reiterate how proud they are of the workforce and the way in which they have both ‘stepped up’ to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19, but also the way they have adapted to the change and transformation programme thus far.

The Council are however realistic about the need to focus on continued improvement. There is a consistent appetite to continue this improvement journey which draws a level of enthusiasm from almost everyone the peer review team spoke with. Whilst some of the improvements are in relatively early stages; firm foundations are now in place to start to realise the benefits of these changes in future years.

As highlighted by the Council and the peer team - improvement is an ongoing and constant process. Much of the feedback contained within this report focusses upon helping the Council to meet its next set of priorities on a sustained basis.

The Council has in place an ambitious transformation programme which features throughout this report. The message from the peer team in regard to this is simple:

Hold the line, keep it simple and keep going!

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- 2.1. Develop the Inclusive Growth Strategy as planned in 2021/22.** Ensure that this strategy takes an 'all ages' approach to skills and employment support, and is co-produced with the various public, private and community stakeholders across St Helens (including health).
- 2.2. More closely align the membership of the place-based partnerships with the key private sector partners now operating in St Helens.** This can help ensure those partners are well engaged across the local growth and skills strategy.
- 2.3. Look to find ways in which the Council can 'forward fund' the growth plans for St Helens, bearing in mind the implications this may have for the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.** Doing so can help ensure delivery against the economic ambitions has increased resilience.
- 2.4. Ensure members, officers and partners are clear on what the localities model will mean for them at each stage of development, this is key to a strong foundation for this work.** Ensuring that an appropriate ward member role remains a feature of this model throughout will also give the work on localities a much greater chance of sustained success.
- 2.5. Review the approach to operational HR** to ensure council services receive the level of support they require to deliver on the improvement and transformation needs of the Council.
- 2.6. Consider how property services can also adapt ways of working** to take more of a business partner approach, which is more closely aligned to helping the Council realise the corporate priorities.
- 2.7. Continuing to refine the longer list of priorities that sit beneath the established six Borough Strategy priorities, on an ongoing basis will help the Council to sustain momentum over the long term.** This will also mean streamlining and refreshing, on an ongoing, routine basis, the list of performance measures used.

## 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

### The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Tom Stannard** (Chief Executive - Salford City Council)
- **Cllr Sir Stephen Houghton** (Leader – Barnsley Council)
- **Sarah Messenger** (Workforce Consultant Local Government Association)
- **Stephanie Butterworth** (Director of Adult Services – Tameside Council)
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – **Dan Archer** (LGA).

### 3.1. Scope and focus

Through this Corporate Peer Challenge review, progress against each of the recommendations from the original peer challenge was considered.

This Corporate Peer Challenge review follows on from an extensive, tailored package of support provided by the LGA to the Council over recent years which has included:

- intensive support for children's services
- improvement support for adult services, finance, communications and performance management
- a culture review, alongside ongoing support for both members and officers.

This peer challenge did not seek to provide a full review of all areas of Council business corporately, rather to review progress made against the following themes (and in particular the recommendations bulleted beneath each of them):



## **Member and Officer Leadership**

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- The Chief Executive should work with other senior officers to develop a more distributed leadership model which empowers Strategic Directors and senior managers (within a framework of clear accountability) and decreases the current over reliance on the Chief Executive.
- Enhance capacity at Assistant Chief Executive (ACE) level to support the change programme and the co-ordination of political and managerial decision making.
- Provide a development programme for both members and officers to improve joint working, better understanding of their respective roles and reset the Council's culture to drive positive change and ensure it addresses the issue of poor member behaviour as referred to in the report.

## **Corporate prioritisation**

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Ensure that the review of the Council's strategy for the refresh of the Council Plan engages with members, officers, partners and residents and leads to an expression of its vision and priorities for the Borough that is widely owned and clearly understood.
- Develop clear priorities for modernisation to realise the adaptive innovator model, followed by a delivery roadmap with sufficient resources to ensure success.
- Arrange an urgent all member briefing on Children's Services, highlighting the challenges facing the Council and how it needs to respond, and ensure that improving Children's Services remains a clear corporate priority.

## **Accountability**

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Overhaul performance and financial reporting arrangements to provide clearer information for better informed decision making and performance monitoring.
- Ensure constructive performance challenge and robust performance management across the organisation.

### **Enabling transformation**

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Develop and invest in a comprehensive approach to organisational development, including strengthening internal communications and engagement.
- Develop and invest in a more proactive external communications strategy – to promote good news, mitigate and manage bad news and reinforce the St Helens narrative – to be owned and delivered across all service areas

### **Inclusive growth.**

This included the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- As part of the regeneration strategy, develop a programme to support adults in work to develop their skills to progress their careers and earnings, enabling them to take advantage of the full range of opportunities presented by jobs growth in St Helens
- Develop a capital and investment funding strategy that takes account of the Council's priorities, including its regeneration and economic investment goals, and ensure this is linked to the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

In addition to this, the Council sought through this peer challenge revisit, additional critical challenge against the following themes, which the team were able to provide:

- How the Council is working to widen and deepen a culture of 'enabling and co-production'. Put simply, how the Council works more closely with partners, businesses, and local communities.
- How the Council is capitalising on the opportunities of health and social care integration.

- How an agenda for reducing inequality is placed at the centre of everything the Council does.

### 3.2. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused. It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then:

- **Spoke to around 90 members, officers and partners** as well as additional research and reading.
- **Collectively spent over 120 hours to determine our findings.**
- The equivalent of one person spending **over 3 weeks in St Helens**


This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1. Member and Officer Leadership

At the time of the 2019 CPC it was clear that poor member behaviours within the majority group were having a detrimental impact on Council business. It can now be seen how member-to-member behaviours within the majority group have improved. This has helped the Council to focus its attention more intensively and consistently on the key priorities for St Helens and ensure pace is maintained in relation to decision making.






It is important that these improvements continue by further working on developing constructive cross-party relationships. Members from both sides of the chamber unquestionably share a passion for the prosperity of the Borough and the continuous improvement of the Council. Key aspects of this next stage of improvement for the Council overall include community engagement, localities based working and co-production. If the Council wishes to truly embed these ways of working, members and how they work together cross-party at a ward and localities level, can set an important example. Members positively modelling a genuine commitment to these ways of working to officers and partners – by the way they are seen to work cross-party in, and for, localities can be powerful in further embedding a positive culture focused on the improvement journey for St Helens. The peer review team recognises that a level of political ‘back and forth’ will remain a feature, as it is of all Council chambers. Being mindful of continually building strong relationships and a whole council, cross-party dialogue focused on improving the Borough for all its residents should remain an ongoing part of how the Council’s more mature political culture continues to develop.

The Leader and CEX, both new in post since the last CPC in 2019 received significant, widespread positive feedback for the roles they have played in leading this improvement journey from those at the Council as well as their local and regional partners. Partners share a sense that *“the Leader and CEX have made us part of the team”*. Partners in the Liverpool City Region also now see the Council as an increasingly positively and proactive partner in the sub region.

The Council has significantly strengthened and made permanent the senior officer leadership of the Council by appointing an almost entirely new senior officer leadership team, many of whom were appointed within the last 18 months. This includes the appointment of a new Assistant Chief Executive who has been in post since May 2020 and was a response to one of the recommendations made in 2019. This new senior officer leadership team are seen as highly capable by those internally and externally. As stated by one partner but echoed by many *“we can see a team of people are now here who can really help us deliver for St Helens”*. This senior capacity is being utilised to effect, with a sense of ‘distributed leadership’ across the senior officer cohort. This is particularly the case now also across key external agendas of health and care and regeneration and growth.

Cabinet members now have a working relationship with senior officers which is positive, honest and collaborative. A much clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities is evident, with members and officers familiar with working to these roles. As stated by a member at the Council *“there is confidence and honesty in both directions”*. This




improvement follows on from a purposeful investment of time into internally and externally facilitated development sessions for Cabinet members and the senior management team over the last two years. In line with this improved understanding of roles and responsibilities, a consistent process and rhythm for political and managerial decision making is now in place. Key to which are clearer roles for members and officers in policy and strategy development. Member development sessions are now used to gain an overarching policy direction, with officers developing strategy accordingly in response.

Wider and more open information sharing can also now be seen from officers to all members. This includes regular member briefings and routine engagement from the CEX with the leaders of opposition groups. Alongside this, improvement can also now be seen in corporate governance. This includes the clarity, transparency and consistency of decision making. Decision making has a clearer and more consistent link to the Medium Term Financial Strategy of the Council, as one example of this. In addition, the Chairs of Scrutiny (who are from the majority group) are well engaged and enthusiastic about the importance of their roles. Scrutiny is seen by the Leader to provide constructive challenge and is engaged in a range of activity.

The Council is clearly committed to transformation and is now progressing its wide-ranging transformation ambitions. It's clear from speaking to members, officers and partners – as well as being in the Council buildings throughout this peer challenge - that this is becoming embedded and change is starting to really happen across the Council. This opens many new opportunities for future ways of working and change to support the Council's economic ambition and financial strategy. For example, the Council has already enhanced its digital infrastructure and adapted to agile working. What further future opportunities might these foundations now create for future service delivery models which may have not previously been foreseeable? These foundations can also create new opportunities for future co-design and community engagement which in itself can also then lead to further, new opportunities.

One element of the transformation programme has been the development of the 'Ways of Working' culture programme. This is a considered and rounded programme which encourages, enables and empowers those at the Council to adapt to agile working by '*working together, wherever*'. The 'Ways of Working' programme was built on the back of extensive engagement with staff including 26 workshops, the participation of 250 people in sessions and 525 survey forms. Totalling an estimated 8,000 lines of data to help shape the development of this programme. Increased internal staff engagement has become a cultural feature at St Helens over the last 18 months – more detail on which in the section below on 'Enabling Transformation'.




The change initiatives at the Council are becoming increasingly embedded. This is evident when speaking to staff and being around the Council buildings. Many staff feel inspired by the steps taken by the new leadership and want to see this continue. The peer team were able to observe how the Council appears to be a happier and more productive place to work than when members of the peer review team had visited previously. Members and officers want to see the transformation continue. The team's advice to the Council in this regard is to 'hold the line' on the wider transformation work and see it through. Keeping things clear, avoiding adding too many messages and focusing on delivery will enhance the chances of further success.

The Council has around 150 officer cultural champions who have an important role in connecting the change programme to the staff experience and have done so on a variety of topics such as appraisals, creating the new office accommodation and providing a forum to share information and collaborate. The culture champions advocate consistently and with passion for the changes being made. They clearly have an important role in continuing this journey. Aligning their work to the equality and diversity network can help to further develop and sustain what the Council is trying to achieve.

In any council, achieving transformation at pace and scale places demands on the corporate core to help enable this. Feedback from those at the Council, consistently highlighted that in some areas, further consideration is needed as to whether specific parts of the corporate core of the organisation are operating at a level and in a way that helps the Council to achieve what it is aiming to. Further detail on this is contained within the 'Enabling Transformation' section.

A significant part of the transformation programme for the Council is the movement towards a localities-based model of delivery. The Council informally requested specific feedback during the course of this peer challenge on this model. This is included as appropriate throughout this report. Whilst the peer team were able over the course of the time on site to get a clear sense of the intentions of this model, not all members, officers and partners appeared consistently clear on what the localities model will do and how it is expected to develop over time. The peer team's observation is the current localities model in St Helens is a quite sophisticated, long-term approach to neighbourhood level service integration and prevention, but we observed a tension with short term objectives from some partners and members in relation to devolution of decision making and neighbourhood budgeting. In light of this, there is also a question of what the expectations of local communities will be from this model and how this is communicated. This is particularly the case given the council's wider messaging about working with others, co-production and community engagement. Clarifying expectations will help ensure the implementation of this model is




successful, sustainable and has the foundations for further, future development. As this work develops, the Council should also look at how the role of members is embedded within the localities model and ensure appropriate training. This means ensuring there is a clear mechanism by which ward members can inform service delivery in their locality with the insights they receive in the ward – keeping the local member voice at the heart of this model.

## 4.2. Corporate Prioritisation

Over the course of the last year, the Council has engaged in depth with members, officers, partners and the community to develop a new Borough Strategy for the period 2021 - 2030 which was launched in March 2021. There are now six clear priorities in place, which includes a priority to *'Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life'*. There is a commitment to delivering against those six priorities from members across the majority group, which was not the case to the same extent in 2019. Taking the time to engage properly on the development of this strategy has helped with this. As stated by one member *"we sat around those tables – we know these things matter to communities"*. The Borough Strategy is one of 25 plans and strategies developed and approved over the previous 12 months. This represents a purposeful effort to fill the 'strategic deficit' that was identified as part of the previous CPC.

As is the case in any Council, having a clear strategy is one thing, embedding and delivering against it is another. A clear alignment is now in place from these corporate priorities into the other policy and strategy documents.

Central to the new 2030 Borough Strategy is a stated commitment to *'Working together for a better borough, with people at the heart of everything we do'*. Partners can see how the Council are more open and seeking to work with them, to realise these local priorities. A stepped improvement over the last 18 months is recognised - just one example of which being the way in which the Council has led the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaborative #StHelensTogether approach taken throughout this period signified a commitment to this way of working which members, officers and partners have been proud to have been involved in, given the impact it was able to have in the Borough over this challenging period.




At the time of the previous CPC, the Council were recommended to develop clear priorities for modernisation underpinned by a roadmap for delivery which was aligned to sufficient resources to deliver this. The Council now has a number of transformation initiatives within a corporate programme, with a 'reset and recovery roadmap' established. Some parts of this modernisation approach – notably the 'Ways of Working' programme are starting to see a real difference in how the Council operates and the use of estate. Other parts of this transformation programme are at an earlier stage – including the localities approach to service delivery and the recently published Community Engagement Strategy. There remains a long-term modernisation vision and journey which the Council is working towards, and each directorate now has a more specific programme of transformation in place underpinning this.

At the time of the previous CPC, the Council had received focused visits from OFSTED as well as a LGA peer challenge in children's services, both of which presented challenging feedback. These exercises identified poor performance in children's services which was impacting on the outcomes experienced by children in families and posed further risks to the reputation of the Council.

By the time of the 2019 CPC the Council had taken steps through its initial response to the OFSTED findings, but the children's services improvement programme was at a very early stage. As a result, the improvement required, as well as the time and resource demands of this were not fully appreciated. Feedback in this regard was made as part of the 2019 CPC. Following this CPC, the Council then received a full OFSTED inspection in September 2019 which resulted in an 'Inadequate' OFSTED judgement.

The Council remains on this journey of improvement in children's services which will require continued attention to see the improvement journey through. The Council is awaiting a full OFSTED reinspection, which will decide whether the Council remains 'Inadequate' or has improved significantly and consistently enough to move out of this category. An OFSTED virtual visit was conducted in July 2020, with a Department for Education six month review also taking place and a further OFSTED visit in May 2021, both of which noted positive improvement.



From a corporate perspective, it can be seen that the Council is now prioritising children's services much more rigorously and consistently. A children's service improvement plan and board are in place, with progress monitored regularly and sector support accessed regularly. Members now report feeling well informed about the progress being made in children's services. This commitment to improvement in children's services can also be seen by the financial decisions made by the Council, with an additional £15m of permanent funding committed to children's services from 2020/21. Like all councils, given the wider changes presented by the Health and Social Care Integration, the Council needs to remain alert to (and try to manage) the risks of the new Health and Social Care commissioning arrangements for children's health commissioning, given the links to the improvement of children's services - particularly in light of the large geographical footprint of the emerging Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care System.


### **4.3. Accountability**

The Council's financial and performance reporting arrangement were highlighted in 2019 as requiring further work to better support well informed decision making and democratic accountability. The peer team identified the need to overhaul performance and financial reporting arrangements with a view to this providing members and officers with better informed decision making and performance monitoring. The Council were seen as having a good track record on financial management. There was however a need for more detailed savings plans which are seen through and a seamless and more visible connection between clear financial monitoring, robust performance monitoring and strategy.

A new performance management framework is now in place which is built from the Borough Strategy priorities. Shaping the performance reports from these corporate priorities has led to a much clearer line of sight for members and communities from what the Council is saying it wants to achieve and how this is being progressed.

The structure of the recently refreshed performance scorecards allows for suitable comparisons to statistical neighbours and the direction of travel. This helps to more robustly support a 'no surprises' approach without being wholly reliant on performance against a pre-defined target. This is important given the failure of performance monitoring to alert council colleagues effectively to the challenges in children's services in 2018 and 2019.

Further to this, structurally, the Council has also taken the step of aligning performance staff into a singular team to share skills, support resilience and reduce any potential 'single



points of failure' in terms of the performance/business information required for key service areas. This creates the potential, in time, to develop more informed, cross-Council intelligence around the outcomes sought for St Helens. The thread from the Borough Strategy goes further than this however, with a well-established connection now also in place from the Borough Strategy to the Audit plan and Risk management arrangements.

The new approach to performance reporting, which was launched in the months leading up to this peer challenge has been well received by members. The corporate performance report currently contains a number of measures and some members and officers have asked these are focused down further, to help draw more attention to the most important metrics for the Council and borough. This is an ongoing process that all councils who are strong at performance management go through routinely. This involves regularly sense checking the list of priorities to ensure they remain relevant. In doing this, there is also a requirement to consistently evolve the type of metrics used. This can help to continue to ensure the specific strategic intent of the Council is being delivered against.

At a corporate level, the Council is transitioning from what might be deemed performance monitoring to performance management. Performance information is now being used increasingly to support more informed corporate decision making and challenge. Senior Management Team and Cabinet reviews of performance have been put in place including 'deep dive' performance clinics which are seen by officers as both challenging and supportive. Training on performance management was provided to all members in November 2020, continuing to support more members to engage with performance management will help to sustain and build further progress in this regard.

On the finances, the Council agreed a budget and an updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in March. The budget includes permanent savings options for 2021/22 against a budget of £149.8m, with further savings committed to for 2022/23. This will help the Council to deal with budget pressures on an ongoing basis. As at 31 March 2021, the Council held £12.5m in the General Fund Balance compared to a minimum level of £12m. The peer team would support the focus of the MTFS on savings delivery and avoiding any further calls on earmarked or non-earmarked reserves.

Following the feedback received as part of the last CPC, finance reporting has also been made clearer in Cabinet reports with a clear overarching statement about the Council's financial standing featuring more prominently at the front of these papers. This will play an important role as the Council monitors the delivery of the savings programme identified for this and future financial years.

#### 4.4. Enabling transformation

In the previous peer challenge a series of recommendations were made to help the Council to deliver transformation across the organisation. Whilst the vision for transformation has changed, these actions remain important for delivering the new transformation ambitions. This includes organisational development, internal and external communications.


The Council has now separated out organisational development from operational HR and has put in place a dedicated Organisational Development and Design Team to support organisational transformation. The work done to engage staff in the transformation programme are very much welcomed by staff. More than ever staff feel listened to - *“we are listened to; we can contribute and we can make changes”*.

It is crucially important that the Council is able to see through its improvement and transformation ambitions – given the requirements of the budget position. The next stage of which being the Phase 3 reorganisation. Feedback received by the peer team consistently indicates that the Council’s Operational HR function needs to adapt to respond effectively to the changing and more sophisticated level of service the Council requires of it, to make change happen at the pace which is needed. Modernising and streamlining this function now needs to take on greater corporate urgency to provide Council services with the relevant support required. Operational HR activity needs to dovetail with the excellent OD activity already underway. A HR strategy is in development which is a step forward in this regard.

Another service area which may also need to be adapted to meet the demands of this change programme is property services. Shifting more towards a business partner approach which has a greater focus on helping the Council to achieve the six corporate priorities can have an important role.

Colleagues at the Council highlight how ICT have been seen to have played a big role over the last 18 months in helping the Council to manage the changes required from ‘lockdown’ and beyond this, supporting the requirements of transformation. Surface-Pro devices and Microsoft 365 were successfully rolled out just prior to March 2020, putting the Council in fortuitous position once the pandemic hit to more smoothly move to remote working.





Communications both internally and externally has a key enabling role in bringing about change. Since the 2019 CPC this is an area where improvement is clearly evident. Internally – the Council has put in place a routine programme of employee engagement which includes (as examples) a Leadership Team Talk Blog, Manager Engagement Sessions and ‘Chat to Kath’ sessions for staff.


Externally, a communications strategy is now in place, with place branding and organisational branding redeveloped over the period since the last peer challenge. This has helped to further project the sense of a fresh new approach of the Council. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the Council’s #StHelensTogether branding was able to gain particular momentum and is symptomatic of an adaptation to the way in which the Council has looked to communicate more effectively externally including offline and online approaches.

As the Council looks to move further forward with a more consistently and deeply embedded approach to community engagement, the Council will need to look at the capacity available for this as well as the skills required to do this well. Doing community engagement well requires an approach to communications which is less about ‘broadcast’ and more about ‘engage with’. Having these skillsets in place will be important to support the movement towards a localities-based approach, as well as the preference for a #StHelensTogether way of working.

#### **4.5. Health and Social Care Integration**

Over the last two years the Council has further built upon the previously established St Helens Cares Integrated Care and Health system which was recognised positively as part of the original CPC. Considered steps have been taken more recently to prepare the system locally to respond to the national drive towards Integrated Care Systems (ICS) and Integrated Care Partnerships (ICP). The St Helens Cares partnership has agreed a shared vision which reflects this of ‘*One Place, One System, One Ambition: Improving Lives in St Helens Together*’.

The Council continues to plan carefully for the implications of the Health and Social Care



White Paper. The Council is clear about its role and position within the Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care System which will be one of the largest in the country. There are clear expectations of the new system especially as regards full delegation to the place.


The Chief Executive of the Council is a member of the ICS Partnership Board with the Executive Director for Integrated Health and Social Care identified as the Place Lead. The ICP has been established and a memorandum of understanding has been signed by all partners with a governance framework including an ICP Board structure which has been agreed by Cabinet. The ICP Board reports directly to the People's Board, which was established to combine the responsibilities of the Health and Wellbeing Board and Community Safety Partnership Board. This has been a positive step and is seen as giving this board additional breadth and leverage.

Relationships with partners across the Health and Care system are generally positive in St Helens. In particular with those at the TORUS Housing Association and with the Voluntary, Community and Faith Alliance (VCFA). The VCFA recognises how the Council wants to support and work with the sector. The Volunteer Portal, which was made possible following the investment of Council resource into the VCFA can be seen as one example which sent out a particularly positive message. This has since had a significant impact in terms of how local volunteers were able to support other local residents through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Council has developed a new VCSE Strategy which includes the voluntary sector having a seat at the Integrated Care Partnership Board. There is clearly willing support and the sector recognises increasingly that the Council wants to work with the sector.

Integration at a commissioner, leadership, finance, contact/referral and care record level are clear. Contact Cares – a fully integrated ‘front door’ is seen as working particularly well and is valued by the whole system, the way in which this was co-produced with other partners has left a positive legacy with partners to this day.

The aim to move towards ‘Care Communities’ based on the localities model aims at providing more rounded and earlier support closer to home, in the community. This is work in progress and the link and alignment to the development of Primary Care Networks is




going to be an important step. This reflects the peer team's understanding of the quite sophisticated localities model focused on prevention that St Helen's is currently adopting, but the tension between this approach and member/resident expectations of a simpler model focused on neighbourhood budgeting will need to be carefully managed.

The following section looks at inclusive growth and the steps that have been are to be taken to support residents of all ages (and families) to achieve further economic prosperity over the long term. The health agenda can have a crucial role in this regard – helping more of the local population to be physically and mentally well enough to access and remain in these opportunities. Taking the time with partners to reflect on the contribution that different partners and anchor institutions can have on this priority might be an important step. There are examples of good practice and creative ideas to build upon, which might also fit with the requirement for the development of a comprehensive strategy in this regard. It will also help to make clear the potential role that health and social care integration can have in reducing inequalities, beyond the successes already seen from having a more integrated care system – namely in contact and the shared care record. As this strategy develops, the metrics for understanding the genuine impact of integration on outcomes more widely will need to develop further and can then be used as a valuable evidence base for further, future opportunities. The plan for a Care Academy is just one, early and direct example of how the health and care system locally can support the ambitions for increased employability of local residents.

#### **4.6. Inclusive growth**

Over the course of the last 16 months, the Council has understandably focused its efforts on helping local businesses to survive throughout various stages of national and sub-regional 'lockdown'. In particular, the Council has focused attention on administering grant support to local businesses, whilst also supporting local retail and hospitality businesses to open safely and legally. Over this period the Council managed to distribute approximately £21.365m of business grant support in 6,496 payments to local businesses. On the back of this, attention has turned to economic reset and recovery with an Economic Reset and Recovery Plan agreed which aims to support the reset and recovery of the local economy through to Summer 2022.




The next step is for an Inclusive Growth Strategy to be produced later in 2021. This will provide a delivery framework for the local economic ambitions. This is due to include a refreshed analysis of the employment and skills needs of residents, post COVID-19, relative to the local economic growth plans and newly established growth pipeline. The peer team have recognised that an ‘all ages’ approach to skills and progression is particularly important here. This should become the basis of a new approach to delivering inclusive growth for residents across St Helens. .

There is real potential for further socio-economic prosperity in St Helens that the growth plans for St Helens can create. Examples of these opportunities include research and innovation industries, not least Glass Futures, logistics, Parkside / Liverpool Freeport & rail freight interchange as well as the large scale physical transformation of the borough. These opportunities can have a wider, preventative long term impact. The Council will need to consider brave steps to forward fund this activity in its revenue budget. Doing so can help ensure delivery against the economic ambitions has increased resilience. Shortly before the peer team came on site, further progress was made to develop a dedicated programme management team for regeneration projects which is a further, positive step forwards.

Since the previous CPC in 2019, the Covid pandemic has inevitably delayed progress with some of the previous recommendations on inclusive growth. At this stage now, the peer team would encourage the Council to refresh this work with a new strategy and investment for supporting skills development and employment support, building on the pipeline of job creation schemes across the borough and the community engagement momentum in the localities agenda. At its core, the approach should reflect investment in brokerage capacity for the Council and its partnerships to better connect the three key areas of individuals in communities, job opportunities, and learning and skills providers. This capacity should be designed to be able to carry a greater “case load” of local residents, and to support endeavours to get local people work ready. It should also help build stronger employer engagement in curriculum design by providers. A core aspect needs to be ensuring this is an all-ages approach capable of supporting both adults and young people entering the labour market for the first time, given the vulnerabilities in the working age adult labour market across the Borough.

As referenced elsewhere in this report, partners across St Helens can each make a valuable contribution to this ‘all ages’ approach. There is an opportunity given the sense of



shared commitment across partners to further explore creative new ideas and bring together locally what the Council has identified is a fragmented skills agenda. This approach will require focus and brave decisions in the next budget round for the Council to invest in this all ages approach to skills as part of its revenue budget planning. The peer team would be happy to support to the design work on this approach further in future.

To further support activity in this area, a new Place Board has been established and the Council is starting to embed the role of this board across partners. Terms have also been agreed for a 20-year partnership with the English Cities Fund which is a significant milestone. Principal local private sector partners increasingly regard the Council's political leadership and direction on its regeneration programme positively. In light of the new private sector partners now working in St Helens, there is an opportunity to review the membership of place-based partnership structures (including the Place Board) to ensure all of the benefits of these relationships are realised for the borough. This is an exercise it is beneficial to do on a routine basis, ensuring the key private sector partners over time are suitably represented. The Council has a positive and proactive presence within the Liverpool City Region. There are real opportunities in the region against the agenda, working with the Combined Authority.

The Council has capital plans valued at around £110 million for the period 2021-24 which includes investment in highway and property assets, regeneration schemes across the borough as well as invest to save schemes. Responding to the recommendation from the 2019 CPC, a strategic Asset Investment Group (SAIG) was established to lead on capital investment strategy and a Land and Property Acquisition strategy supported by a £10m fund (using capital receipts) has been approved to help further accelerate local regeneration plans. Further-still a Commercialisation Strategy has been developed and additional capacity has been brought to the service area including a new Deputy S151 officer as well as an Assistant Director for Commercialisation.



## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Claire Hogan, LGA Principal Adviser for the North West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Claire is available to discuss any further support the council requires, her email address is [Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk)