

# Sector Led Improvement

## Bristol City Council

Improvement Journey and Progress made  
following its Corporate Peer Challenge

*Observations and findings from the LGA Visit to Bristol  
City Council on 16 September 2019*

## 1. Introduction and Purpose

Paul Clarke and Emily McGuinness, both Programme Managers from the LGA's South West regional team visited Bristol City Council (BCC) on 16 September 2019. We met with, or spoke to by telephone, 16 internal and external stakeholders. There were two main reasons for our visit:

- To test the progress the council has made a year on from the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge of September 2018. <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/council-spending-performance/corporate-peer-challenge> Firstly, to provide an external perspective to inform the council's action planning arising from the peer challenge, but also an update ahead of the formal peer challenge follow up in Autumn 2020 (when a number of the original team, including Paul Clarke, will return for a more wide-ranging review)
- Arising from this report, it is the intention of the council and the LGA to produce a case study to be published on the LGA website, for the benefit of the Local Government Sector, charting BCC's progress, as well as views about the value of the support it has received from the LGA, within the context of its 'Sector Led Improvement' offer <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/our-improvement-offer/what-sector-led-improvement> This will be produced once this report and its recommendations are finalised and agreed with the council.

## 2. Overall observations from our visit

We heard consistent messages about a step-change and building momentum behind the council's improvement journey. Importantly, we heard how in the last three years it has improved significantly, both in terms of its leadership of place and leadership of the council, alongside which improvements are planned or in train in respect of the council's organisational culture and governance arrangements. Nevertheless, the council's leadership both politically and managerially know there is still work for them to do to reach their full potential. Mike Jackson, the Head of Paid Service reflected that..... *'We have made big strides forward, however, all organisations must strive for continual improvement and our aim and focus is to be a Council working consistently at the top of its game.'*

When prompted people spoke about four main influences behind that change and improvement:

- The election of Mayor Marvin Rees in 2016. This created a change of political direction.
- The 'Bundred Report' of 2017 – an independent review of the management of the council's finances, commissioned by the Mayor, which found there had been a collective failure of leadership in achieving past savings and in how the council managed the process. This was a fundamental 'line in the sand' and recognition for the need to change. It was identified as a real 'tipping point'

- The new senior staffing structure and appointment of the Council's Senior Leadership team into the structure in 2018. This was seen by the people we spoke with as a fundamental change from the past, putting a strong emphasis on building senior officer capacity, capability and positive organisational change
- The Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Sept 2018 and LGA support. Stakeholders attached value and importance to the external challenge and recognition by the sector of change and improvement

### 3. Main observations and findings

We were told that the election of Mayor Marvin Rees in 2016 has served to foster a strong sense of purpose for both the council and the city of Bristol. The drive, energy and commitment the Mayor has shown throughout the last three years to refocus the role of the council as a 'convener' for all the major city partners and help to galvanise a new vision for the city up to 2050 was a recurring message and ambition. Several stakeholders said that the 'One City Plan' (<https://www.bristolonecity.com/one-city-plan/>) with its accompanying underpinning commitments and actions has given a 'common purpose' for all of Bristol's key leaders.

Stakeholders told us that the ambitions were not just about growth, or housing and the economy. Importantly, it is about building new and co-operative ways of working for the benefit of the residents of Bristol. For example, when the City Council identified it needed to recruit more foster parents, some of the city partners responded by improving the terms and conditions for their employees to enable them to apply and become foster parents, with their full support. In doing so they made this a shared priority for the city not just the council. The result: an uplift in the numbers, vulnerable children receiving better support, improving their life chances and importantly socially responsible city organisations working together and making a real difference.

One of the CPC report findings was that there needed to be a far stronger narrative to underpin the One City Plan. From our discussions with the stakeholders we met, and with the example referred to above, that narrative appears far more clear, coherent and established – people are buying into what the change is about. No doubt when the CPC team return, they will want to test this assumption far more widely. They will also test the resilience and sustainability of the City Office, which is a core function in ensuring the co-ordination, governance and deliverability of the plan and wider 'One City Approach'. For the present BCC has clearly been the driving force in resourcing the office and the very able core staff currently responsible for running this. For the future, such a function will be key to maintaining that progress and as such should be a core priority.

A key message from the CPC report was that BCC should review its governance arrangements to ensure they are more effective in enabling good decision making. We heard mixed views about the progress in respect of this. Whilst, for example we heard that there had been a shift by making the council's Forward Planning arrangements more open and transparent, some stakeholders still felt that the focus and impact of the council's scrutiny arrangements are not yet as fully effective as they might be.

There was recognition that the LGA has provided help to support the council in making a shift here too, for example by providing targeted training input to help councillors focus on the core scrutiny issues and challenges for BCC. We were told that councillors have welcomed LGA support for the scrutiny function and that there is now real enthusiasm about the future Scrutiny Work Programme. We note that Members used a workshop format for setting their Work Programme for 19/20 and suggest that this approach be used in future years, ideally with participation from both Cabinet Members and senior officers. It is clear also that Member engagement is improved, senior leaders are proactively seeking the involvement of Scrutiny and offer to attend, which is very positively received. However, there is still some work to do across the board and reference was specifically made about ensuring appropriate access to information. Therefore, this LGA support, alongside the CPC recommendations, are helping to ensure that the council keeps this front and centre and it will be important that such changes are backed up by actions and outcomes.

At the time of our visit we had a sense that all stakeholders were already preparing for the Mayoral elections in May 2020 and therefore when the Peer Team revisit the council in the autumn of next year, they will of course also review the depth and scale of progress that has been made. Good governance is crucial to all organisations, but given BCC's previous shortcomings in respect of this, it is very important that this remains front and centre.

**The 'Bundred Report' of 2017** was variously described by stakeholders as a 'tipping point' and a 'line in the sand'. The report findings made it clear that the senior officer structure and accountability, especially in respect of financial management, was not fit for purpose. The council needed to make changes to personnel, re-establish the trust between Members and officers which had all but evaporated, and start to establish an open culture where progressive values and good behaviours were promoted and upheld. As the Mayor told us... *'I needed values writ large, I wanted people who could work to our common purpose, and we needed to do this quickly'*.

John Walsh, Director of Workforce and Change explained that the Mayor was very clear about the values and behaviours he was looking for in the people who would be appointed into the new senior structure and during the transformation period the help and support of the LGA was invaluable, partly because the levels of trust between Members and officers within the council were at a low ebb. John told us *'We needed honest, trusted and timely advice and the LGA provided us with that'* He went on to tell us that through Andy Bates, the LGA's Principal Advisor for the South West, the council was able to access 'top notch' advice to help deal with the aftermath of Bundred, the personnel changes that were required, and to support the council as it planned and delivered its senior management restructure. This culminated in the LGA commissioning an external advisor (a highly experienced and well-respected former council chief executive), to act as an expert and independent reference point throughout the recruitment and selection process to help BCC appoint to its new Senior Leadership Team. As John said, *'this helped us draw that line in the sand, recruit sound new leaders and we could finally look forward and upwards'*

The appointment of the Council's Executive Director and Director teams during 2018 was a further significant turning point with 14 of the 17 posts being new appointments.

This gave further impetus and belief that the new team would live the values and behaviours from day one.

We heard from everyone we spoke with that each of them is highly respected. People told us that right from the time they all took up post, they demonstrated through words, actions and deeds that individually and collectively they were committed to the key values and behaviours, such as respect, ownership and collaboration, which the Mayor and the wider council members and staff group hold dear.

At the time of the CPC we advised that the new political and managerial leadership team at BCC needed to invest time and energy in order to establish strong, sustainable and effective working relationships. We also advised the council needed clarity, certainty and stability, especially within its Executive Director team.

It has now been 18 months since the council appointed a new leadership team. Many of those we spoke to recognised that the council has made significant progress to break down organisational barriers and empower colleagues to deliver the organisation's key priorities during this time. Notably the new leadership has helped address what one stakeholder described as... *'the council's habitual aversion to risk'*.

The LGA received feedback from several key stakeholders who expressed a view that now may be the time to consider appointing a Chief Executive. This would bring greater clarity and accountability and the role would create the right conditions to drive delivery, further embed improvement as well as provide additional energy at the top of the organisation. In light of the progress the Council has made and to ensure continual improvement the LGA endorse this feedback and believe this would be a very positive step forward.

That clarity and accountability is important for partners, as they need a clear reference point in the senior officer group for decision making. Importantly, this wasn't about any negative reflection in respect of the performance of the individual or collective Directors; indeed, quite the opposite. It was about creating the right conditions for the council to push on with change and provide a strong officer figurehead to work 'hand in glove' with the existing strong political figure head. A strong leadership figurehead would bring clarity around accountability in the top team for both internal and external stakeholders.

We also heard a clear message that a Chief Executive would be a vital role in sustaining and providing additional pace to the change process. A 'one Council' approach which provided vitality driven by a Chief Executive via the Directorate senior team and middle management would assist in enabling change to happen at all levels of the organisation.

As one senior Member told us, *'We are continually striving for excellence and need someone to drive that ambition as well as somewhere for the buck to stop-what better way than to appoint a chief executive to help us with that next big step'*

Maintaining the stability achieved at the senior leadership level will be a key factor to consider as the council approaches the next election and beyond. Should the Council

decide to appoint a Chief Executive and given the existing expertise within the current team, the need for stability and the significant progress already made to deliver change, the appointment could potentially come from the within.

**BCC is now a council that embraces sector led improvement and the CPC of Sept 2018 confirms that.** It has welcomed and benefited from such help, including direct support from the LGA, and now is also clearly offering the same back to the sector. For example, just in the last three months, two of its senior officers were part of LGA peer teams in other councils advising on how they might improve, especially in respect of governance and transformation.

That change in approach came following the Mayoral elections in 2016 and is evident in the way that senior councillors across the political spectrum sought out and embraced peer support from the LGA, taking up places on its national leadership programmes and gaining one to one support from political peers from other councils to offer help and advice. Indeed, both the Mayor and the two Deputy Mayors have benefited from such support. Deputy Mayor Craig Cheney told us that the support was invaluable. He was able to access the 'Next Generation' programme <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/next-generation> where he was immediately learning and networking with aspiring future local government leaders from across the country. Likewise, he recalls taking up the support from his peer mentor Cllr Graham Chapman from Nottingham City Council right from the early days and which still is in existence today, as Craig said *'To just be able to ring Graham up even now three years on and ask his advice and get a wise response, is just the support I need'*

That LGA support went beyond the political and managerial leadership and corporate support. It was equally evident in key demand-led services, notably children's and adults. Jacqui Jensen, Executive Director People and Terry Dafter, Director: Adults Social Care, told us that when they first came into post, they recognised the lack of a robust performance culture in both adults and children's. In Terry's case he worked with one of the LGA's Care and Health Improvement Advisors, John Jackson to really drill down to ensure that the data they were using became reliable and the strong support around cost, spending and financial overview as part of this has helped him shape a far stronger model.

When it came to supporting children services, Jacqui echoed the same point that there wasn't an embedded performance culture in Children's and told us the support and challenge from the LGA was very useful... *'the expertise we received from the LGA around establishing a Quality Assurance framework has made us far more self-aware'*. This in turn meant the council was in a stronger position for a scheduled Ofsted visit to help shape with confidence the service's self-evaluation for that subsequent inspection. Jacqui says she will always look to the LGA and the external challenge it provides and that Claire Burgess, the LGA's Children's Improvement Advisor is a regular visitor, sounding board and as Jacqui described her as... *'One of my main 'go to' people'*. As a result, the Directorate is more confident, sustainable and proactive and this results in better outcomes. As Jacqui says... *'The support we received from the LGA in respect of Early Years and SEND has meant we are in a far stronger position to respond, shape and deliver more effective services.'*

It was clear from our visit that the improvement activity and support identified above has helped BCC to become a stronger council (recently shortlisted by LGC for Council of the Year). The LGA led Peer Challenge of September 2018 acknowledged this. The improvement journey will always continue and in light of this there are things the Council will need to attend to, for example we have highlighted now may be the right time to consider appointing a Chief Executive, continue to drive and push on with the organisational cultural improvements, the need for certainty and resilience within the City Office, and the need to ensure the council's governance remains focussed, strong and fit for purpose-amongst other things. Therefore, we have highlighted below these four core issues as recommendations for the council to attend to, arising from this visit and we look forward to the peer team returning next year to assess progress.

The future ambitions for BCC to continue to improve, is best summed up by Dep Mayor Cheney *'The LGA led Corporate Peer Challenge was a game changer; we had external confirmation of the green shoots of change' The council takes the action plan it developed on the back of this very seriously and is looking forward to welcoming the team back next year to let us know what they think. We will listen, hear and act on that advice'*

#### **4. Summary recommendations (progress to be reviewed through CPC follow up)**

1. Consider appointing a Chief Executive
2. Ensure sufficient capacity and resilience is in place within the City Office, to help sustain oversight of the 'One City Plan' and 'One City Approach'.
3. Continue to push the plans for organisational culture change and evidence this with tangible outcomes
4. In advance of the CPC follow up, demonstrate that changes you have made within your governance arrangements are having a positive impact