
Somerset County Council

Corporate Peer Challenge – 2018

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Introduction

Who

- LGA program on behalf of the sector with MHCLG support
- Team of sector experts

Why

- Government expectation following abandoned corporate inspections
- Demonstration of an ability to self-govern and scrutinize
- A desire for us to challenge, learn and improve
- Improvement focused

When

- Expectation of every 5 years at the maximum
- Previous SCC process in 2014
- Coincide with the quadrennium, post-OFSTED, publication of Vision and development of Business and Service Plans

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Scope of CPC

The core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges, namely:

- Understanding of the local place and priority setting
- Leadership of Place
- Financial planning and viability
- Organisational leadership and governance
- Capacity to deliver

As part of the above we asked the peer team's view as to whether:

- The priorities we have identified and your draft plans will deliver improved outcomes for the residents of Somerset and should we be confident that we have the capacity and resilience to deliver them
- Our work with partners is as effective as it could be?

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Understanding of the local place and priority setting

- There is a clear and shared understanding between SCC and its partners of the challenges and opportunities of Somerset
- SCC developing a new county vision and engaging with key public stakeholders for further shaping-ambitions to promote a county vision into the longer term.
- These are the right things to be doing but actions to deliver them need to be brought to life with partners

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Leadership of Place

- More outward focussed than 4 years ago
- Strong partnerships – leader and CEO led
- LEP relationships are strong
- Lead on economic development initiatives
- Open and willingness to engage with others
- Engage well with VCS
- Schools building programme
- But need to concentrate on partnerships that are not delivering

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Leadership and Governance

- Strong leadership exemplified by Leader and CEO
- Make difficult decisions
- Need to continue to work as a team and team needs to develop
- Good officer / political relationships but they need to be challenging
- Need focus on financial sustainability
- Further encouragement and support of scrutiny
- Good systems of performance and risk management

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Capacity to deliver

- Positive approach to staff
- Recruitment and apprenticeship strong
- Confident staff
- Energised service managers
- Lack of depth at a senior level
- More community development required
- Capitalise on ICT transformation
- Invest more to ensure ownership of budgets
- Key plans in place and developing further
- People strategy vital to improve this aspect further

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Financial viability

- Demonstrable ability to deliver significant savings
- Low revenue base for the Council
- Difficult decisions being taken
- Areas of overspend are unsustainable
- Overspend must be addressed, savings delivered
- Urgent focus on Children's base budget
- Ensure members have sufficient finance and performance info
- Exploit commercial opportunities

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Key Message – CPC team

- We acknowledge the journey that SCC has made and there are a number of positive developments aligning to help the council face the future

BUT

- The council faces a major challenge with its budget position
- The immediate situation needs to be gripped
- At the same time a compelling vision and way forward built for its future sustainability

We believe the council can do this but it needs absolute focus, commitment and pace

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Recommendations

To address its financial challenges SCC must ensure a clear and strong accountability framework owned corporately and consistently applied. In doing so it should:

- immediate action to reduce any overspend during 2018/19
- develop a comprehensive set of achievable savings plans as part of its budget setting for 19/20
- address the children's base budget so that it is challenging but realistic
- ensure there is strong financial accountability in all areas of the organisation
- ensure members have sufficient financial and performance information on which to make informed decisions and deliver challenge
- make clear the roles and accountability for senior officers and members and consider the appointment of a cabinet portfolio holder to provide a single point of oversight.

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Recommendations – cont'd

- The council should align its vision, priorities, business and services plans. These must be underpinned by a Medium Term Financial Plan which should be complimented by a clear performance framework to help ensure its delivery
- The council should invest time in the development of its 'Top Team' of Cabinet and Senior Leadership Team
- SCC council's vision should be further developed with a view to establishing a county wide owned one, with associated joint priorities
- SCC should review its overall approach to scrutiny, ensuring all councillors are equipped to play an active role and contribute to the policy making and key decisions affecting the future of Somerset's residents and the council

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