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Chief Executive
Derby City Council
Council House
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Tuesday 8 January 2019

Dear Carole

Follow up to the 2017 Corporate Peer Challenge

I promised you some feedback from the work we have been doing to seek to improve some elements of culture identified in our 2017 Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). This letter does that, but also seeks to put it into context.

The 2017 Local Government Association CPC of Derby City Council recognised many strengths:

“There is clear pride in being associated with Derby at all levels of the council, across the city and its communities. Councillors and staff are clearly committed to the organisation and to the city, and want to do the best for residents and service users. At operational and strategic levels there are many examples of good partnership working where the council and its partners can point to results and some outcomes that local people recognise.”

But there were also some challenging messages around accountability, governance and political culture, including:

“Whilst we heard some positive views about the majority of councillors this does not apply to all elected members of the council, and we heard of concerns of poor behaviours from a small number of councillors. Councillors need to ensure that they act with the highest levels of integrity and statesmanship at all times, irrespective of role, seniority or political party. More effort also needs to be made in improving working relationships across the membership of the council.”

The report also identified other challenges, such as the need to increase corporate capacity, review your financial strategy, improve strategic partnership working and develop a clear workforce development plan. In total, we made eleven recommendations for improvement.

When the CPC landed in Derby, the positive messages were, to some extent, drowned out by the messages about relatively isolated issues of councillor behaviour.

Since publication, The Council has taken these issues seriously and has worked hard to address both them and also those raised from other sources such as the Public Interest Report. The Council combined all these issues into a Corporate Improvement Plan. It has now worked through a large number of those issues, to such an extent that many previously identified weaknesses have been successfully dealt with and are now business as usual.

In short, the Council has moved from a glass half full attitude, with elements of crisis, to a “can do”, positive attitude, a higher degree of stability, meeting statutory basics such as getting the 2017/18 Final Accounts signed off on schedule and making a positive difference to the way it is leading and delivering for Derby. Some notable recent achievements include:

- Unqualified sign off of the 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18 Statements of Accounts
- Key senior appointments in the Corporate Resources Directorate, strengthening corporate capacity
- A successful city centre deep clean
- Great progress on redeveloping the Market Hall
- Opening of the new Riverside Library and impressive co-location with the DWP
- The Youth Offending Service receiving a “good” rating
- Delayed Transfers of Care being one of the best in the country.

However, given its previous prominence, a key focus of this follow up letter is to report back to you about the issue of councillor-councillor and councillor-officer roles and relationships. The original CPC suggested the Council ask for external support and facilitation on this issue. You did just that. The LGA carried out some facilitated discussion sessions with officers of the council during early Spring 2018 and then again in the Autumn. We also undertook sessions with the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Groups over the past couple of months (unfortunately we could not agree a date with the UKIP Group).

The sessions with staff and councillors allowed us to have a more refined view of what the issues were and where responsibility lay. While there were some more-general frictions around response times to councillor casework and enquiries, the issue was in fact much more contained. The issue was very much about a small number of individual councillors who were in key positions and who had been behaving in ways which appeared to be well adrift from the standards expected and which were away from the Member Code of Conduct and the Member Officer protocol. These behaviours were having a poor impact on the overall officer perception of councillors and on trust between councillors and officers.

However responsibility did not lie solely at the door of those councillors. There was also a failure of the political Groups to properly hold those individuals to account and to use

Group and Party processes to act against poor behaviour. Although the word “Groups” (plural) has been used here, the vast majority of concern was expressed about a small number of members of one particular Group.

Alongside the failure of the political Groups, there was also a failure in some of the senior officers to consistently set and enforce the right expectations of service, advice and behaviour and to enable individual officers to feel they would be supported if they raised concerns about what they were being asked to do, within what timescales and how they were being communicated with.

Two phrases which were used by some participants in our discussions with officers seemed to sum up the situation well:

“This is just the way things are.” Where officers had expressed some concerns about behaviours, colleagues and line managers often responded with that phrase. This suggested a high degree of acceptance, rather than determination to resolve poor behaviour. What was normal from some people was being deemed acceptable when it wasn’t and shouldn’t have been.

“More people doing the right thing more of the time.” This phrase recognised the fact that there was some good behaviour, good tone and style from some leaders, good engagement and service from officers towards councillors. It showed the ambition for greater consistency. But it showed there were pockets where this was not the case.

The situation hasn’t completely changed; but it is changing to a significant degree. A new political administration in May 2018, coupled with the change of many senior or key officers over the last 6-7 months has led to a rise in trust and an improvement in relationships in general. It has brought about a positive change in the style of leadership.

These changes have been almost exclusively as a result of changes in people (and resultant change in behaviour and culture) rather than any explicit change in guidance, systems or processes. There is a particular recognition, since May 2018, of the tone of new leading councillors, who are seen to be undertaking their challenging roles in an appropriate and positive style. There is also significant confidence in the new CEO and her visibility and approach.

There has been substantial work on culture change, including increased staff engagement, improvements to communication and more shared leadership activity. Completion of the vast majority of the Corporate Improvement Plan objectives has paved the way for the continuous improvement activity that all good organisations undertake. Indeed a comprehensive range of work is well underway. This has included management development, stronger co-ordination of city and regional partnership working, establishment of a Programme Management Office, and practical training on political

nous and the expectations of working in a politically balanced council. These positive changes are widely recognised.

There have, however, still been some reported issues of poor councillor behaviour. A forum where this is currently most visible is the “Executive Scrutiny Board” meetings. Some of this may or may not have been contributed to by the interaction with officers (where some additional coaching may be appropriate), although that in no way justifies poor councillor behaviour.

To balance this, it is also of note that an officer who started at the Council since May 2018 felt they had no real concerns about councillor behaviour in Derby. Perhaps this indicates that, where fears and concerns are still held, they may be being coloured by past experiences, rather than being a balanced view of the current situation.

However it does seem to be the case that a number of officers do not seem to fully appreciate the realities of working for, and in, a politically-led organisation, especially one with more overt politics because of its no overall political control.

We also picked up a more-general concern from some staff that May 2019 could be a point when things potentially backtrack; if the election were to bring further significant change. In other words, some officers do not feel that recent changes will be resilient enough to stand up to any re-emergence of challenging behaviour.

Even if things do not deteriorate from May and continue to improve, it will take some time to completely undo the negative culture which, for some, is more than just a perception and not already historic.

Our view is that the Council needs to adopt several approaches to further embed and strengthen the recent positive progress:

- relaunch the various codes of conduct (even if no changes are needed), with clear statements from councillors and officers of expected behaviours, supported by more awareness raising
- clarify expectations, agreed with councillors, of the timeliness of responses to their enquiries, casework etc
- work with councillors and officers to ensure expectations of advice, support and timeliness are met consistently and that councillor meetings are run and supported in the best way possible, so as to minimise the risk of this being a generator of any poor behaviour
- further work to remind officers of the roles of councillors, helping to develop their political nous etc (this is already underway)
- further steps to embed the confidence of officers that they will be taken seriously, and supported, if they have concerns about any councillor behaviour

- work between officers and sometimes between officers and councillors to actively learn from situations where practice and behaviour has been sub optimal

I trust that this is a helpful summary of the changes we have seen at the Council since our original Corporate Peer Challenge and that the advice above will help you further consolidate the recent improvements on behaviours, on the perception of councillors and on the level of trust between councillors and officers.

Please do get in touch with me directly if you would like to discuss this further or require further support on this, or indeed anything else

Yours sincerely



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