

# City of York Council Corporate Peer Challenge

**Feedback from the peer challenge team  
June 2013**

# The peer challenge team

- Dave Smith, Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council
  - Jon Collins, Leader, Nottingham City Council
  - Clare Whelan, Councillor, LB Lambeth
  - Giles Perritt, Director, Plymouth City Council
  - Tom Stannard, Director, NIACE
  - Fiona Johnstone, Director, Wirral Council
  - Judith Hurcombe, Challenge Manager, LGA
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# The process of peer challenge

- Thank you for the invitation. We have been made very welcome and well supported
  - Not an inspection: the team provide feedback as critical friends, not inspectors or assessors. We are reflecting back what you have told us
  - Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future
  - We have spent 4 days onsite at York during which we:
    - Spoke to more than 150 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
    - Gathered information and views from more than 47 meetings, visits to key sites and additional research and reading
    - Collectively spent more than 200 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending over 7 weeks in York
  - Feedback session at end of onsite visit, followed by a short report and follow up activity (to be confirmed)
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# Scope and 'brief' for the peer challenge

You asked us to provide an external 'health-check' of the organisation by considering the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges, namely:

- Understanding of local context and priority setting
- Financial planning and viability
- Political and managerial leadership
- Governance and decision-making

And two additional areas of focus:

- Being a responsive and innovative organisation
- Community infrastructure and capacity building

# Quotes of the week

The new building  
is little short of  
conceptually  
brilliant

The support we  
get from CYC is  
excellent

As Cabinet  
members we  
push all the  
little things; as  
Cabinet we  
push all the big  
things

Of the 12 councils  
we deal with, CYC is  
the best one with  
which to do business

This is a good  
council to work  
for

The culture is  
an explicit  
commitment to  
successful  
partnerships

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# Local context and priority setting

- Clear drive for economic growth
  - Visible ambition for the organisation and the place
  - Strong leadership on growth agenda from Leader and Chief Executive
  - A wealth of community assets and traditions
  - Economic strategy has sound foundations and is well recognised: going beyond the heritage/visitor economy alone
  - Emerging view of cohesion/community relations in context of significant future demographic and social change
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# Local context and priority setting (2)

- Too many priorities
  - Adding more priorities without losing any: the priorities are not yet shaping the day job
  - Does the financial strategy support the breadth of priorities?
  - Growth priority is clear, but what kind of growth?
  - The council plan:
    - Limited ownership and understanding
    - How grounded is it in ward level priorities?
    - How it links to supporting strategies, especially workforce and MTFS
  - Adults – major priority for budget, the strategy needs to include greater assurance on transformation, quality and safety
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# Financial planning and viability

- You have a clear 2 year budget strategy that balances
  - You are maximising income including building up the council tax base
  - Appropriate challenge and review in 2 year strategy
  - Sound capital strategy including plant/fleet/machinery investment and street scene/public realm improvements
  - Financial leverage case for the switch of LEPs stacks up
  - Schools all contribute to the school improvement fund
  - Adults – there is a transformation plan and financial strategy, but you need greater dispersed leadership of this because it is so critical to the budget
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# Financial planning and viability (2)

- No clear transformation plan across core services
  - There is evidence of core financial stability but we've not seen evidence of a strategic financial plan that grounds income and efficiencies over the medium term, in order to fulfil your ambitions
  - Transformation capacity seems patchy and project-specific – need a stronger corporate/programme management approach
  - Traditional salami-slicing budget cuts:
    - Which big ticket medium-term savings do these support?
    - Impact of this on wider service delivery
  - Resourcing neighbourhood and ward engagement – these appear to have been easy targets for reductions
  - Limited progress on key development sites
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# Political and managerial leadership

- Leader is providing strong, visible leadership, clear about his priorities.
  - Strong leadership and credibility for the Chief Executive from all levels within the organisation and from a wide range of partners and stakeholders.
  - Positive and collaborative relationship between Leader and Chief Executive, both of whom are perceived to be passionate about achieving their vision for the city.
  - Buy-in to the ambition by the majority of strategic partners, and positive relationships are the norm. West Offices is home for some key partners, and a place that others are welcome to visit.
  - Cabinet members understand and provide leadership within their portfolios
  - Clear member commitment to the city and its people.
  - There was evidence of a strong community focus amongst backbench members.
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# Political and managerial leadership (2)

- Too many priorities result in stretched officer capacity
  - Portfolios and directorates working together need to more closely contribute to fulfilling the leadership's ambition for the city
  - The Cabinet and CMT need to address the perception amongst backbenchers, opposition members and communities that they are neither informed nor able to influence decision making
  - Cabinet and CMT should refine their understanding of their respective roles and contribution in delivering the council's responsibilities
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# Governance and decision-making

- Cabinet is well chaired, feels that it has momentum since 2011, and has an awareness of the need to identify 'non-priorities'
  - Has delivered some 'big things' like the West Offices move, and a balanced two year budget
  - Partners remain signed up to the Local Strategic Partnership
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# Governance and decision-making

## (2)

- Some partners, stakeholders and officers are yet to fully recognise the contribution of members to the leadership of the authority
  - Neighbourhood governance models are not clear or widely understood.
  - Have partnership structures caught up with or sufficiently focused on new and emerging agendas?
  - The council needs to further develop its approach to measuring and demonstrating success and performance against its ambition for the city
  - Scrutiny is under developed
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# Being a responsive and innovative organisation

- This is a highly energised organisation with a lot of ambition and motivation e.g., ICT
  - At a tipping point of looking forward and needing to do things differently
  - Some good organically grown ideas e.g., Telecare service, fleet transport
  - You need to balance innovation and your capacity to deliver
  - Capacity seems over-stretched now
  - Do you have all of the right people and culture to transform?
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# Community infrastructure capacity building

- The skills strategy for the economy shows clear plans for creating pathways to work, re-skilling and labour market access for deprived communities
  - The future operating model needs to be clearly articulated.
  - Current expressed intent/priorities are strategic, enabling but most of current resources are traditionally focused
  - Is there sufficient capacity or capability at strategic management level to be transformational?
  - Significant cuts from area management, play development, community development may run counter to building community capacity to engage in co-production and design
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# Key messages

- Widely recognised that you've got the right ambition for the city
  - Ambition and energy invested so far has led to high expectations for York
  - Ambition needs to be better matched to the resources available
  - The ability to deliver that ambition is at risk unless you better articulate, plan, manage and deliver
  - Delivering the council's ambition will require hard choices, greater focus and more rigour.
  - Test the deliverability of your ambitions against the community and council's capacity for change in the current climate
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# Next steps

- Consider our feedback
  - Draft report within 3 weeks
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**Thank you**

