

Ashfield District Council

LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel

Key Reflections

23 March 2022



Introduction

On 23 March 2022, Ashfield District Council (ADC) hosted, via MS Teams, an LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel. The Panel focused on the council's current approach and potential future direction of travel as it seeks to best support its residents and businesses post the Covid 19 Pandemic.

The council requested reflections from the team on:

- Ashfield District Council's approach and direction of travel,
- How this is shaping the longer term aims, ambitions and opportunities for the District and the Council,
- The LGA team's thoughts on ADC's priorities for recovery/renewal including:
 1. Maximising council's role as a Strategic Leader and an Enabler rather than always a provider and
 2. Capacity to manage/deliver in a changing context.

The Panel Team included the following participants from Ashfield District Council:

- Cllr Jason Zadrozny (Leader)
- Cllr Matthew Relf (Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Planning)
- Theresa Hodgkinson (Chief Executive)
- Craig Bonar (Director, Resources & Business Transformation)
- Ruth Dennis (Director, Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer))

The LGA Team was:

- **Lead Peer:** Donna Nolan (Managing Director at Watford Borough Council)
- **Member Peer:** Cllr. Jim McKenna (Independent Cornwall Councillor for Penzance)
- **Review Manager:** Ernest Opuni (LGA Improvement Manager)

Key Reflections

The reflections from the team were grouped under the following themes:

- Workforce and way of working
- Recalibration of the functions and contributions from members and officers
- Potential devolution and resource implications
- The 'Golden Rope' including
 - Linking the new Strategic Direction and annual refresh of the Corporate Plan
 - Political ambition,
 - Focusing capacity in the right places to deliver the corporate priorities

Additionally, the LGA team is feeding back its thoughts about 'Managing commercial risk'. This is not because of any concern about ADC specifically. It is a reflection of a theme which the Panel feels ought to be on the radar of all councils at the present time.

Local context and overall impressions

The efforts of both councillors and officers have been hugely important in ensuring the success of ADC's response. Both demonstrated a real pride in Ashfield (both the council and the place).

The pandemic both tested and brought out the best of ADC which provided strong leadership throughout a long-term crisis. The council led the response and the recovery within the district by effectively utilising existing relationships with its various partners. These relationships have been further developed and enhanced through the pandemic, resulting in the mainstreaming of resources for some of the vital work of the voluntary and community sector for example.

The council has been an active participant in cross county arrangements for managing the pandemic. This was evident through its work as part of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) partnership working arrangements. This work included a keen focus on providing mutual aid and humanitarian support to communities who required this during the period of the pandemic. ADC's partnership working with Public Health, local Clinical Commissioning Group structures and the wider CONTAIN infrastructure supported its delivery on enforcement, testing and vaccinations programmes. CONTAIN is the government framework setting out how national, regional and local stakeholders worked with each other, the public, businesses, and their communities to prevent, manage and contain outbreaks of coronavirus.

Throughout the duration of the Covid 19 pandemic, ADC maintained a keen focus on maintaining effective core Council service provision. Notably in its role as a 'leader of place' ADC has strengthened its voluntary sector and community network partnership working and collaboration. This included the development of Social Value models, evaluating processes in order to better understand impact and mainstreaming some of the work of this sector.

The council has made a conscious effort to integrate its Covid response and recovery tasks into existing mechanisms such as ADC's Corporate Plan and Risk Management arrangements, whilst linking this into its delivery of its Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). There has been a keen and deliberate focus on integrating the response to Covid 19 into a 'Business as Usual' approach as far as is possible. The council can point to its Leisure Transformation Programme and delivery of Social Housing schemes which were not derailed by the pandemic. This was achieved as a result of its concerted efforts to preserve ADC's core service delivery ambitions in the face of the unprecedented challenges of the past two years.

ADC submitted successful bids for Accelerator, Towns Fund and High Street Fund worth in excess of £60m during the pandemic whilst also providing effective support to businesses and proactively engaging with the sector. ADC also secured Safer Streets Funding whilst continuing with a focus on decarbonisation programmes.

ADC fast-tracked its Digital Services and Transformation Programme and swiftly embedded Hybrid Working as the norm for the council. ADC also took the opportunity to start to rationalise its assets and to consider opportunities for co-Location arrangements with its partners. Both its internal and external work was underpinned by a culture of 'Working Together'.

In terms of its staff, the council has made a demonstrable effort to maximise their Health and Wellbeing and to ensure that its Human Resources policies (alongside support for staff in

the approach to hybrid working) are evolving in a fashion which is fit for purpose, post COVID 19.

ADC is a self-aware organisation which is well-sighted on the inevitable challenges the pandemic has left in its wake. Not unlike other councils there is some 'covid exhaustion' evident amongst its staff, which has also impacted adversely on recruitment and retention with regard to supply and demand of some critical roles. The council is aware of the competing demands, capacity pressures and the need for member-officer engagement to be reviewed going forward. A consequence of the pandemic is that existing social, community and economic pressures have been accentuated and the council is aware of and keen to address these.

Overall ADC is accelerating towards future goals and commendably has not been diverted, in spite of the challenges of the pandemic and the changing policy and political landscape. The council's stated aim is to integrate learning, address challenges, drive opportunities (accelerated or created through Covid Response measures) within wider strategic plans and policies. As a result, the council has taken a conscious decision to not have a stand-alone Covid Recovery, Renewal, Reset Strategy or Action Plan.

Reflections from the LGA Panel

The LGA Panel would reflect the following views back to ADC and has organised these messages under a number of headings:

Workforce and ways of working

The leadership role of both members and senior officers is vitally important as they are the 'standard bearers' of hybrid working and need to model and support any changes emanating from this evolution. It will also be important for ADC to ensure that it has sufficient capacity allocated to developing the principles of agile working and underpinning this with a policy framework which supports this.

It was clear from the panel discussions that ADC benefits from having a very committed and loyal workforce. The pace at which the council transitioned its workforce from being traditionally office based to becoming, in essence, a virtual council is commendable. This process also demonstrated the council's commitment to protecting the wellbeing of its staff whilst ensuring the services continued to be delivered. Consideration now needs to be given to providing managers with the necessary skills and resources to deploy any new ways of working in a hybrid working environment.

Hybrid working provides a full spectrum of arrangements. A key ingredient of future success for ADC will involve a clear definition and communication of where the council aims to be and how it seeks to get there by exploring a range of approaches. These could include:

- A centralised approach. Under this arrangement teams are informed when they will work from home and when they must be present in the office.
- A team-by-team approach. This allows individual teams to devise the patterns that best suit their operational requirements
- A fully distributed approach. Under this model every employee has maximum choice over where and when they work

If any agreed arrangement is to be successful and embedded, effective engagement with staff at all stages of the process will be critical. This would include ADC being clear with its

staff about how radical the council is prepared to be in managing this change. It will also be key for the council to decide whether it is adopting a top-down or predominantly bottom-up approach from the options outlined.

Hybrid working also requires a different approach to workspace in order to address to the challenges of agile working. It will depend in significant part upon collaboration between team members, partners, stakeholders and members. Rationalising space creates opportunities to work more closely with partners via co-location and is an opportunity to reflect the values and ambition of the council wishing to be an effective collaborator in its place-shaping/place-making role.

In order to address issues identified regarding recruitment and retention, it will be important for ADC to build any hybrid working practice into its approach to recruitment. It will also be key for the council to be mindful that it addresses the potential inequity of any approach to hybrid working. This is particularly relevant to staff such as those on the 'frontline' for whom this approach is unlikely to apply.

ADC is not alone in the recruitment challenges it faces. In terms of future opportunity, the agenda around devolution, and the likely impact on joint working approach across Nottinghamshire and possibly Derbyshire too, could be used as a route to look more strategically at this issue.

It is also true that ADC is not alone as regards the challenges of exhausted staff. The council already has a good package of support for staff (such as signposting staff for mental health support). ADC may wish to consider reviewing its staff health and wellbeing strategy, action plan and role of health and wellbeing officers in light of learning from the pandemic. There will have been longer term health impacts for staff and as a result, their needs/expectations will have changed. All of this will be key in effectively supporting both personal, individual resilience of staff whilst having wider implication for the resilience of the organisation more widely.

There may be some value in ADC carrying out mini reviews of services to identify lessons learnt from the last year. This could assist in ADC better understanding impacts on services, performance and resilience, whilst also looking to the future in identifying upcoming challenges. The findings from such an exercise could positively inform the future delivery of services and the way ADC will work going forward. No doubt there will be benefits from how this exercise informs ADC's future strategic direction.

Recalibration of the functions and contributions from members and officers

The close working between members and officers throughout the period of Covid 19 is apparent. This was key to the council's ability to deal successfully with the pandemic and future challenges ahead.

Members of both the Executive and Leadership Team have worked more closely than ever during the pandemic. Both have demonstrated a collective spirit of endeavour across functional boundaries to advocate for the district and respond to the crisis.

This collaborative approach is important to retain. However, with the Council's ambitious strategic agenda it will be important to ensure that senior members focus on setting the strategic direction and agreeing the policy framework, whilst allowing officers to deliver the council's policies and the day-to-day operations of the council.

Nottinghamshire's devolution considerations are clearly on the council's agenda. The Leader and Portfolio Holders in particular will have a significant role in representing the council effectively on county, regional and national fora.

Locally as the role of the ward member recalibrates from response, to living with Covid, it is important to build upon the platform of closer working with ward councillors. Progression will mean an ongoing commitment from officers as well as agreeing purposeful shared and specific actions. Doing so can help the district to realise renewal and help support senior members and officers to focus on their strategic objectives. This could include some or all of the following support to ward councillors:

- An effective signpost for residents and businesses to the support they need from across the wider 'system' offer.
- A source of informed encouragement and support to develop solutions within the community and amongst partners; this should include a policy of 'no surprises', whereby ward members have advance notification of anything significant which the council is planning to do within the area they represent.
- Supporting, challenging and informing the Council's operational delivery, but without stepping into delivery and
- Supporting and recognising that Cabinet must focus on meeting the council's strategic objectives, including the devolution agenda.

ADC's Decision Making Accountability (DMA) work with the LGA is now underway. The DMA approach is an organisational design tool which establishes the number of layers of management that an organisation needs – and the units within it – to achieve its purposes most effectively. This is best achieved by effective utilisation of the decision rights that managers in different layers require to be empowered. It is a proven way of creating effective organisations and an efficient management structure and ought to contribute effectively to ADC being fit for purpose going forward. Additionally, the role of political assistants and the ongoing support from SOLACE will be critical in supporting Ashfield with this recalibration of roles.

It will be hugely important to support all of the work in this space with a recalibrated approach to communications, which underpins the strategic and corporate direction of the Council. The work with the LGA on Ashfield's Branding will be a key strand of ADC's thinking going forward.

Devolution and resource implications

Devolution is a live issue for the district and requires attention. ADC is ambitious for its place. This means it will be important for the council to make a realistic assessment of the capacity needed to work on the devolution agenda whilst at the same time delivering its strategic ambitions. In the view of the Panel taking stock and considering what devolution means for leadership of place will be important. Included in this will be close consideration of where Ashfield fits within the wider Nottinghamshire place.

The process of taking stock should include a review of the strategic leadership capacity that will be essential - at both an officer and political level – to co-design and advocate for a devolution deal that works for Ashfield. It will also be important to reflect on the relationship the council has with the area's MPs to ensure that there is mutual respect and as well as strategic alignment to deliver Ashfield's ambition for place.

There are opportunities for continuing to build effective relationships with Nottinghamshire County Council as well as with ADC's City, Borough and District colleagues within Nottinghamshire. Ashfield is well-placed to maximise these opportunities for influence by dint of Nottinghamshire's status as a Devolution Pathfinder as part of the national Levelling Up agenda. It will be important that Ashfield continues to build trust and confidence with all of its partners and stakeholders in this space. It will also be critical that ADC ensures that the council retains open communication and engagement with staff as this agenda evolves.

The 'Golden Rope'

The use by the Panel of the term 'Golden Rope' rather than the more widely used moniker of 'Golden Thread' is deliberate. It reflects the scale of relevant moving parts in the multi-faceted and multi-layered approach ADC will need to consider in achieving the full breadth of its ambitions.

The LGA Panel endorses the ADC approach of thinking beyond Covid 19 recovery as a standalone priority. However, given this decision it will be important for the council to ensure organisational alignment between the wider learning, challenges and opportunities emanating from Covid and ADC's future vision and strategic direction.

It will also be important that the new strategic direction is reflective of the political vision and direction of the ADC Administration. Knitting a clear link through all of the council's strategies and operations is crucial if employees and members are to be enabled to buy-in to the future post-pandemic direction.

Some areas for key consideration include:

- Ensuring performance in a hybrid working environment is well-defined, effectively managed and has achievable and measurable outcomes.
- In a competitive market where towns and cities are vying with each other to boost visitor numbers and economic prosperity, the role of a compelling place brand is increasingly recognised as an important ingredient of success. The Discover Ashfield Board has brought real strength to the district. Going forward ADC will have a clear role in Ashfield as a place developing an inspiring vision, purpose and narrative as this could be critical to its success. Some of the components of this could include:
 1. *Place purpose.* What is it that Ashfield can become famous for that creates value for people, place and the wider world? This creates the 'Why' for an area's offer to those outside it.
 2. *Aspirations.* What does Ashfield want to achieve for itself, its businesses and communities over the next five, ten, twenty years? This creates the 'What' narrative.
 3. *Character.* Defining character that drives Ashfield and makes it different from other places - this creates the 'How' in the vision for a place.

Managing commercial risk

As is the case for all areas, successfully managing supply chain, increased costs and inflation as an integral part of economic development is key. The UK construction market remains incredibly volatile following labour and material shortages brought about by the UK exit from the EU and the ongoing COVID pandemic. Whilst the market appeared to be showing signs of stabilising towards the end of Quarter 4 of 2021, construction inflation has

come under increased pressure due in part to shortages of certain materials and latterly, elevated fuel prices as a result of the global impact of the current situation in the Ukraine.

Continued labour and material shortages represent the key limiting factors for building whilst construction costs are anticipated to rise significantly over the remainder of 2022. The increase in these costs will outpace tender prices. Inflation has hit new highs with material prices now sitting almost 25 percent higher than in 2020. The Bank of England is suggesting that continued interest rate increases can be expected throughout the coming months. The industry is suffering an incredibly challenging period where the 'rule books' are being rewritten. With construction outputs dropping, material and labour costs rising, volatile interest rates and market instability, it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict longer term future market conditions.

For all of these reasons ADC should consider implementing a Commercial Risk Mitigation and Opportunity Tracker across the council's Capital Programme in order to manage the Authority's risk.

Moving Forward

Workforce and ways of working

- Now is a good time to reflect on where the council is on its journey toward hybrid working and ensure that member and staff engagement is embedded to ensure success.
- Supportive leadership from Cabinet and Chief Officers is essential in ensuring the council's workforce continue to be committed at a time of significant change.
- Apply lessons learned from the pandemic to better understand the resilience and upcoming challenges.
- Refresh of the health and wellbeing offer.
- Think more radically about ADC's approach to recruitment and retention. Utilise the opportunities afforded by devolution.

Recalibration of the functions and contributions from members and officers

- Collaboration continues to be important whilst recognising the need to return to some form of normality and separation of duties between members and officers.
- Work with SOLACE and LGA is important to Ashfield in the recalibration of the respective roles.
- Both the Cabinet and senior officers have a vital and distinct role in representing the district in utilising all opportunities to exert full influence.

Devolution and resource implications

- It is important for the council to undertake an urgent and realistic assessment of the capacity needed to influence the devolution agenda whilst at the same time delivering on its ambitious place shaping aspirations.
- Has ADC fully taken stock of, and considered, the impact devolution could have on Ashfield?
- How can ADC maximise Ashfield's influence in its role as a devolution pathfinder?
- It is essential that ADC continues its efforts to build effective relationships outside of the organisation in order to achieve the greatest benefit for the residents of Ashfield. Gaining the greatest possible benefit from devolution will depend to a great extent on how effectively ADC engages at all the relevant 'tables' as this agenda evolves.

The 'Golden Rope'

- Ensure learning and opportunities from Covid 19 are knitted into the forthcoming five-year Strategic Direction(2022-2027) for Ashfield.
- Ensure that the Strategic Direction and underpinning Corporate Plan reflects the political ambition of the administration.
- Strengthen further the Corporate Plan Annual Action/Delivery plan. This plan would explicitly link resources to the achievement of future priorities, whilst ensuring that existing services can continue to be provided to a high standard. Going forward, it is important that the Corporate Plan Annual Action/Delivery plan also links with the Commercial Risk Mitigation and Opportunity Tracker, ensuring the council is setting realistic and deliverable objectives
- Ensure digitisation and its intrinsic critical link to service transformation is carefully embedded within the workings of the council and facilitate appropriate training for all staff involved together with clear messaging for service users.

Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Ashfield District Council for undertaking an LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel. The Council's openness and willingness to engage in both objective reflection and positive future planning was much appreciated.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Mark Edgell (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the Council and the Local Government Association (LGA). His e-mail address is mark.edgell@local.gov.uk