

City of York Council – Direction of Travel Statement

Judgement:

City of York Council is improving adequately

Summary:

Elements of services for vulnerable adults, for example those aimed at improving health, emotional well-being and personal dignity, have declined. The Council has achieved improvement in a number of other priority services and sustained high performance in services for children and young people. It has also contributed to improved outcomes in relation to health, crime and disorder, environment and sustainable transport and, with partners, is making progress on housing and regeneration ambitions. The Council has responded to the findings of the Corporate Assessment by developing a single improvement plan which is giving a sustained focus on improving corporate capacity. Managerial leadership remains strong. Progress has also been made in improving access to services and responding to the needs of diverse communities. Effective political leadership has enabled the Council to work well with partners to define priorities for the future and a range of robust service strategies are being implemented to achieve them. The delay in plans for new office accommodation represents a risk to the future delivery of the Council's ambitions but plans are in place to ensure progress is achieved.

Detailed statement:

The Council has achieved improvement in a range of priority services, the overall level of improvement – with around 61 per cent of national performance indicators improving in 2007/08 - is around the average rate of improvement for single tier authorities. Elements of services for vulnerable older people, relating to health and emotional well-being and maintaining personal dignity and respect, have deteriorated.

The Council sustained its high performance in educational attainment, with particular focus on the most vulnerable children and young people. The number of children below the threshold at each key stage in core subjects has reduced, particularly in the most deprived areas. There has also been an increase in the number of looked after children achieving at least one GCSE pass or equivalent.

The Council has taken successful action to support the priority for improving the health of local communities. It has continued to expand its schools sports partnerships, which has contributed to achieving an increase in the number of children participating in regular exercise. The percentage of children engaging in 2 hours per week of high quality PE has increased from 90 per cent to 94 per cent. The health of looked after children is also improving and there has been a reduction in teenage pregnancies.

There have been notable reductions in the levels of crime and disorder, resulting in an increase in the percentage of people who feel York is a safe place. A targeted alley-gating campaign resulted in a fall in reported crime levels of 68 per cent in the Clifton area in August and September 2008, compared with figures for the same period in 2006. Re-offending rates of YOT-supervised offenders fell by twice the target agreed as part of the LPSA2 although they remain at a level significantly above those for similar areas. An external assessment of the Youth Offending Team

found the service to be high performing, having shown significant improvement over the last two years to become the strongest performing team in the region. However, the dependency on short term funding presents a risk to sustaining the current level of performance.

Overall traffic volumes have remained stable and there is a strong focus on encouraging alternative methods of transport. Investment in park and ride schemes has resulted in usage steadily increasing between 2003/04 and 2006/07, although there was a reduction in passenger numbers in 2007/08 as the result of the introduction of the concessionary fares. Following successful initiatives to increase walking and cycling usage, York has been awarded Cycling City status, which has attracted £3.86 million in external funding to increase cycling further over the next three years.

The volume of waste recycled increased to a level which is amongst the highest quartile of councils nationally. The volume of waste collected has reduced and the cost of waste collection and disposal remains within the lowest quartile for councils nationally. Satisfaction with the service continues to increase. Good progress is being made in improving the condition and appearance of the city's housing estates and street scene. Street cleanliness is improving and parks, play areas and public spaces are of a high standard. The improvement in environmental performance and public satisfaction whilst keeping costs low illustrates the Council's robust approach to value for money, which remains one of its key strengths.

There has been continued improvement in some aspects of housing performance. Re-let times reduced significantly to 24 days which is amongst the top performing quartile of councils nationally. The proportion of non-decent homes continued to fall - from 11 per cent to 10 per cent. However, the rate of improvement is below that achieved elsewhere resulting in the Council falling from top quartile to second quartile. There was a deterioration in performance regarding homelessness, where the length of stay in hostel accommodation increased to more than 10 weeks which is worse than the national average.

The Council has contributed towards ensuring local communities have the skills and knowledge to access employment. The percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) fell from 5.9 per cent in 2006/07, to 3.9 per cent in 2007/08. There was also an increase in the number of adults achieving basic literacy, numeracy and IT qualifications, and young people gaining vocational qualifications. These actions have contributed to a narrowing of income differentials across the city.

However, progress against wider economic priorities has been impacted on by the current economic downturn, which is also placing increased pressure on the social housing stock and housing waiting lists. Progress continues to be made towards the decent homes standard but plans to provide additional housing – including affordable housing units – have been delayed. It is anticipated that the supply of affordable homes will not meet targets over the next two years.

However, the Council and its partners have responded positively to the economic downturn by taking a range of actions to mitigate its impact. These include actions to support business confidence, engaging with developers to support the local housing market, promoting the Credit Union and benefits take up, and the Kingsway pilot project to provide specific support to people in the most deprived area of the city. The Council is also working with two neighbouring authorities and three housing associations on the Golden Triangle partnership which is providing support to households who are having difficulty getting onto the property ladder or are having difficulties paying their existing mortgages.

Progress is being made with actions to strengthen the Council's approach to dealing with equalities and diversity and improve access to services. Good progress has been made in carrying out Equality Impact Assessments in priority services, with a view to incorporating actions into 2009/10 service plans. The format of the Social Inclusion Working Group is being reviewed to ensure it is accessible to representatives of all community groups, and staff reference and engagement groups are being developed. The Council has also delivered language training aimed at the increasing Polish community and increased engagement with BME communities to address health issues. However, planned training for front line staff and managers has been delayed to 2009/10 due to lack of resources. The Easy@York project has continued to improve access to services, along with the Council's ability to respond to service requests.

The Council and its partners have robust plans for improving. The Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) setting out their ambitions for the city for the period from 2008 to 2025 was agreed in September 2008, along with the Local Area Agreement (LAA) which sets targets and provides the focus for action over the next three years. The SCS was based on a good understanding of local needs, following an extensive consultation process.

The Council has reviewed its Corporate Plan to ensure alignment with the SCS and has developed a range of robust service strategies to underpin the delivery of all community priorities. They are supported by action plans and funding from a range of sources. Progress is being made relating to the newly prioritised issue of climate change through an environmental sustainability strategy and a carbon management programme as the Council moves towards developing an integrated climate change strategy. The Local Transport Plan 2006-2011 has been rated as 'excellent' by the Department of Transport, and includes major projects to extend the existing park and ride network. As part of their approach to community safety, partners have agreed an Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy to ensure actions to deal with this issue are better co-ordinated and have maximum impact. The Council's housing strategy has a clear focus on achieving decency standards and increasing the supply of affordable housing and an updated homelessness strategy has recently been agreed. Plans are in place for joint commissioning of care services for older people with the PCT, although strategies to support the wider independence of older people are not yet fully developed.

The Council has taken action in a number of areas to implement its service strategies. New facilities such as the Danesgate Skills Centre and Learning Centres in Acomb and New Earswick opened in 2008 to provide increased access to lifelong learning opportunities, resulting in increased participation in adult learning programmes. The Council has also entered into a Multi Area Agreement (MAA) with a number of other councils to focus on the issues of skills and transport links on a regional basis. Access to external funding has enabled the Council to enhance its support to children and families through Parenting Programmes which have supported 248 families. Additional action groups have been set up through the Active York partnership to engage with schools to increase participation in physical activity and improve health. The Council is also working with the Schools Food Trust to promote healthy school meals. The recent annual primary school conference included a School Food Partnership workshop to discuss how issues such as sustainability can be taken into account in order to comply with enhanced criteria for Healthy Schools status, currently enjoyed by a large proportion of the city's schools. The Council is also increasing the supply of new, energy efficient housing and recently opened a new homeless hostel.

The Council has also continued to build on the strong plans in place to deal with the economic challenges facing the city through the recent creation of the Business Forum. The forum has a wide membership drawn from across the city and has enabled partners to develop a co-ordinated response to the particular challenges presented by the current economic downturn.

The Council has responded positively to the findings of the Corporate Assessment report published in June 2008. It has developed a Single Improvement Plan which provides a single focus for developing organisational capacity. Early progress has been made in developing a corporate approach to workforce development, strengthening service and financial planning processes, reviewing scrutiny arrangements and reviewing the effectiveness of community engagement. Action is also being taken to ensure that recent reductions in sickness absence levels can be sustained.

The Council is strengthening its corporate management to make best use of its capacity. The management team, supported by the Corporate Leadership Group, is providing good leadership to ensure a joined up approach to deal with cross-cutting issues through the 'York Business Model'. Political leadership remains effective and has supported the reshaping of community priorities.

The Council is leading a review of the themed partnerships within the LSP to ensure they have the capacity to deliver the outcomes required. Action planning is underway for each of the themed partnerships and the Council has made funding available through its LPSA performance reward grant to fund partnership initiatives. The Council is also investing in new IT systems to improve efficiency and capacity. These include new financial management and performance management systems as well as new systems in adult care services and improved broadband access.

The Council is taking steps to improve its asset management, although some significant issues remain to be addressed. The Council is making progress in increasing the community use of assets and has begun to develop asset management plans for local areas which will deal with localised issues to improve access to services. The Single Improvement Plan also includes actions to strengthen management of the capital programme. However, the office accommodation project remains a major risk to the Council. The delay in plans for the Hungate development after a significant period of investment and negotiation is creating additional financial pressures, hindering plans for improving access to services and preventing improvement in the Council's environmental performance. The Council has worked well to develop new plans to take its ambitions forward for Hungate and its own accommodation strategy.