

LGA Waste Services Peer Challenge

South Tyneside Council

5th – 7th March 2024

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

South Tyneside Council has an ambitious agenda to improve the lives of its citizens through good quality services. People are proud of the borough and there is a collective ambition for the place and its residents.

There is strong and visible political and managerial leadership provided by the Leader and Chief Executive and a growing reputation for partnership and regional working. It has a committed and passionate workforce wanting to deliver for the residents of South Tyneside.

There is a positive corporate approach to modernisation and change across the council. The 'Our Council' change programme has been developed to help the council move forward in a positive, coordinated, and structured way by providing support to employees and elected Members to realise their full potential and deliver the very best services for the residents of South Tyneside.

The council has all the necessary strategic plans and policies in place to deliver services focussing on stakeholder priorities. It has a new 20 year vision to create a place where people live healthy, happy, and fulfilled lives; a 3 year council strategy which sets out the actions the council will be taking over the next three years to help achieve its 20-year vision; a Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) that outlines its approach to setting out its financial future; and an agreed set of council values and behaviours which act as the guiding principles around how people should behave and work within the council.

The council's leadership has put culture and engagement at the centre of efforts over the last two years to strengthen how the organisation operates. As part of this, Members and officers have worked to engage with and build relationships and trust with employees across the organisation, including through regular all-staff live question and answer sessions; in-person visits to different council sites and teams; a new annual employee wellbeing survey; and through actively engaging a wide range of employees in the development of the new council values and 20-year vision and ambitions plan.

Waste and recycling collection and disposal are two of the key services that the council provides to all residents, and these contribute directly to the council's

ambition for its residents to be part of 'strong communities'.

There have been some improvements and innovations across waste services in recent years, including significant investments in the modernisation of staff facilities, including the canteen, locker and dryer areas, and meeting and training rooms. Other improvement initiatives are in progress. Waste services has also considerably strengthened its financial position over recent years, overseeing a significant reduction in debt and introducing a range of improvements within the commercial side of the service.

However, action is needed to rebuild trust following the recent breakdown in relations between management and operational staff so that the service can get back to delivering high-quality and consistent services for residents. This relationship breakdown was centred on an initial collective grievance submitted by operational staff in June 2023 relating to several historical operational issues including workforce finishing on time, size of rounds, and consistency of annual leave allocations. This grievance was independently investigated and was not upheld. The situation has subsequently led to ongoing periods of industrial action that continues to disrupt services. This has been compounded by trade union approaches to communication and engagement with the council.

The service is now experiencing a discontented frontline workforce which is concerned about lack of progress in addressing operational concerns, communications, consultation, feedback and a general breakdown of trust. This discontent will need to be addressed as part of the roadmap to recovery and service re-set. Continued industrial action is impacting on the quality and delivery of the service provided to residents.

Whilst there is a commitment from all internal stakeholders to make improvements to the service, good relationships between management and operational staff are critical and these require rapid improvement by addressing these concerns. This means:

- I. Reviewing issues around route optimisation and rebalancing of waste collection rounds
- II. Reviewing how the service works at all levels, including resourcing and considering important issues such as the suitability of personal protective



equipment (PPE)

- III. Better communication, consultation and engagement with staff and trade unions
- IV. Reviewing the use of in-cab/CCTV technology and developing modern ways of working to ensure the service meets industry best practice

Related to this and to help build better and sustainable relationships going forward between management and staff, there is also a need to carry out a programme of organisational development work focusing on:

- V. Quickly resolving issues around staff behaviours and practices across the service and bringing them in line with council policies with a zero-tolerance approach
- VI. Repositioning the service so that it better aligns with the council's corporate aims, objectives, policies and procedures
- VII. Putting in place arrangements to consider the wellbeing of staff across the service and related activities
- VIII. Enhancing staff development and capacity to enable them to deliver a quality service

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

2.1. Recommendation 1

Develop an action plan involving all stakeholders to include key issues that need to be addressed by building on previous work, including:

- *Reviewing issues around route optimisation and rebalancing of waste collection rounds, including revisiting previous route optimisation work and working closely with crew*
- *Vehicle replacement strategy that addresses operational and management concerns with current fleet suitability and reliability*
- *PPE – quality, suitability, and accessibility*
- *In-cab technology/CCTV policies*

Doing this quickly and getting an action plan in place is crucial for maintaining trust and ensuring the efficient and effective resolution of these issues. This would reflect a proactive and collaborative approach to the overall success and resilience of the service.

2.2. Recommendation 2

Report back to the workforce monthly/bi-monthly on progress to demonstrate that action has been taken.

This will promote accountability, transparency, adaptability, and continuous improvement. It will help the service stay on track, make informed decisions, and build trust with stakeholders by demonstrating a commitment to addressing issues of concern.

2.3. Recommendation 3

Develop and implement a behaviours and standards charter to be signed off with the Trade Unions.

It is essential to set out a framework on how people will treat each other and how they will behave in the workplace at all levels of the service, and how unacceptable behaviour will be robustly dealt with. The behaviours and standards charter should be in line with the council's 'PROUD' values and behaviours framework and there are examples of these charters, as they relate to waste services, available to build upon.

2.4. Recommendation 4

Review the waste structure to identify any areas for development.

This will ensure that the right skills set are in the right place and that individuals are receiving the appropriate training, development and coaching/mentoring support to enable the service to move forward.

2.5. Recommendation 5

Work with the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) and local partner councils to develop a baseline of performance data leading to the development of a modern ways of working strategy.

Working with APSE and local partner councils to develop a baseline of performance data and modern ways of working means the service can benefit from expertise, objectivity, and additional resources. It will allow the service to benchmark itself and learn from good practice such as use of technology and help the transition to a more inclusive verbal communication model (listening, learning, observing and providing timely feedback) to promote its improvement journey. APSE can support this work.

2.6. Recommendation 6

Develop an engagement, briefing, communication and consultation plan for the service using all available communication tools to deliver.

A well-developed engagement, briefing, communication, and consultation plan, coupled with the use of diverse communication tools, is essential for achieving organisational success, building positive relationships, and ensuring the effective implementation of plans and strategies. Effective communication delivered in the right spirit and with a positive mindset fosters transparency and builds trust among stakeholders.

2.7. Recommendation 7

Apply the council's corporate policies and procedures (particularly Human Resources policies and procedures) across the service and monitor their impact. This must include specifically the introduction of the council's annual review process for all staff within waste services and quickly resolving issues around staff behaviours and practices across the service and bringing them in line with council policies with a zero-tolerance approach.

This is essential for promoting fairness, wellbeing, compliance, efficiency, and accountability within a council. It would align organisational efforts with strategic objectives, minimise risks, foster corporate values and behaviours, and contribute to the overall effectiveness of the council's operations. All stakeholders should be supported and involved in this journey.

2.8. Recommendation 8

Building on the existing training matrix, further develop a robust training, personal development and progression plan across the service and communicate with the workforce.

This will contribute to skill enhancement, employee satisfaction, organisational effectiveness, and long-term success. Individuals will be able to see how they can progress within the service and what training and development they will need to get to the next level up within the structure. At its foundation the value of gaining operational knowledge and insight into municipal waste management operations should be encouraged to aid the building of shared understanding, respect, trust and teamwork.

2.9. Recommendation 9

Review the impact of current industrial relations issue across related services.

This will ensure that related services having to deal with the impact of industrial action have the right information and support available to provide accurate and timely information to stakeholders. This also means providing training and regular proactive updates on waste related issues to public facing staff so that they can confidently support the waste service as a first, but not exclusive, point of contact for citizens' enquiries and do so in an informative and helpful manner.

2.10. Recommendation 10

Commit to participate in and implement at pace the council's cultural change programme across the service, with staff encouraged to engage actively in all facets of the change journey.

Implementing the council's cultural change program across the service is essential for promoting openness, transparency, engagement, collaboration and mutual respect. It can also help in fostering innovation, enhancing employee engagement, promoting trade union relations and positioning the organisation for long-term success in a rapidly evolving environment.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Terry Collins** - former Chief Executive at Durham County Council
- **Chris Wenlock** – Head of Service for Waste, Fleet and Technical Services at Sunderland City Council
- **Glynn Humphries** - former Corporate Director at Wakefield Council / APSE Associate
- **James Lee** - Waste Operation Manager at Durham County Council
- **Satvinder Rana** - Senior Regional Advisor at LGA

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following themes:

1. **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are the service's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the service delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational leadership:** Does the service provide effective organisational leadership? Are there good relationships with the workforce, trade unions, partner organisations and local communities?

3. **Governance and culture:** Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there are culture of challenge, scrutiny and improvement?
4. **Financial planning and management:** Does the service have a clear understanding of its financial position? Does the service have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement:** Is the service able to support delivery of its priorities? Does the service have the human and financial capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on benchmarking of the service operating model; culture, communication and professional development; and the strategic reset of the service and its offer to residents. These areas have been addressed within the above themes.

3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information and perspectives presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council (and the waste services) and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite at South Tyneside Council during which they:

- Gathered information and views from around 27 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to around 50 people including a range of council staff, Trade Unions and Members.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers.

4. Feedback

4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

South Tyneside Council is a well-run council with an ambitious agenda to improve the lives of its citizens through good quality services. It has a clear set of corporate priorities that are articulated through 'The South Tyneside Vision 2023 – 2043' and the 'The South Tyneside Council Strategy 2023 – 2026'. A MTFP is in place that outlines its approach to setting out its financial future. Its organisational culture is driven by a set of council values and behaviours under the strapline PROUD which act as the guiding principles around how people should behave when working for or representing the council. This now needs to be applied consistently across the council.

The council has five broad ambitions of financial security for residents, health and wellbeing, connection to jobs, strong communities, and targeted support to make things fairer. Its ambition for residents to be part of strong communities living in clean, green and connected communities where they feel safe outlines the outcomes it aims to achieve through its waste services.

These priorities and outcomes are translated in the environment service plan and the joint waste services strategy. However, what is less clear is how these priorities, desired outcomes and council values have been communicated to staff and implemented within waste services. There is therefore work to be done to better align and demonstrate the link between corporate ambitions and how services are delivered within waste services, including individual responsibilities. This will require improved communications, engagement and processes for staff development.

At present there is a lack of current benchmarking information available. The last available information took place in 2017/18 - the peer team would therefore encourage the service to work closely with APSE and develop mechanisms to enable it to provide accurate data to the current benchmark process. APSE can provide support to help the service in this regard and share examples of good practice on operational matters.

4.2. Organisational and service leadership

Political and managerial leadership of waste services is provided by the Portfolio

Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Director of Place and Communities. Operational management within waste services is provided by 15 office-based employees and managers and around 70 operational staff who have delivered improvements in recent years. This has included work to refurbish the Middlefields depot and staff facilities, work to introduce in-cab technology supporting faster communication and more responsive services, and work to improve the service's financial position.

However, relationships between management and operational staff have within the last year become fractured. This relationship breakdown was centred on an initial collective grievance submitted by operational staff in June 2023, relating to several historical operational issues including workforce finishing on time, size of rounds, and consistency of annual leave allocations. This grievance was independently investigated and was not upheld. The situation has subsequently led to ongoing periods of industrial action that continues to disrupt services. This has been compounded by trade union approaches to communication and engagement with the council.

This breakdown in trust is having a detrimental impact on staff morale at all levels and is negatively impacting on the quality and consistency of service provided to residents.

These relationships need rebuilding by addressing a range of issues, including better communications, more consultation and engagement, and the building of trust. Whilst managers have explored new ways of communicating with operational staff, these have not been received positively.

Good relationships between management and operational staff are critical and these require rapid improvement by addressing the concerns raised through the involvement of senior leadership within the directorate. This means reviewing issues around route optimisation, resourcing, personal protective equipment (PPE), communication and consultation with staff, and the use of in-cab technology to ensure they meet industry best practice.

Going forward it will be important to build leadership capacity and operational expertise within waste services that aligns with corporate objectives at all levels within the service. This includes mentoring and supporting the development of

enhanced supervision skills at the frontline for those who engage with, and provide guidance and wellbeing support to, operational staff on a day-to-day basis.

4.3. Governance and culture

All the basic governance arrangements appear to be in place across the council. A code of corporate governance is in place which documents the council's arrangements and outlines the systems, processes, cultures and values through which the council directs and controls its functions, and through which it accounts to, engages with and, where appropriate, leads communities.

Waste services is currently delivered in house and is therefore bound by these governance arrangements as well as the council's corporate policies and procedures. However, the implementation of these policies and procedures within the service is less clear. The spirit in which operational policies and procedures are introduced and implemented within the service has fostered a hierarchical and a strong 'them and us' culture between managerial and operational staff. This has subsequently led to some unacceptable and threatening behaviours by staff within the service and an unproductive culture. All this is impacting on the wellbeing of staff at all levels and the delivery of quality services to residents, as well as the reputation of the council.

This needs to change, and more conducive and collaborative working environment fostered. This means rebuilding good relations and trust between trade unions, managerial, operational staff by putting in place arrangements that can rapidly address the most pressing operational concerns and improve communication, consultation and engagement.

These immediate actions should then be complemented by a sustained organisational development programme designed to change staff behaviours to bring them in line with council policies with a zero-tolerance approach; bring more clarity and transparency in the implementation of council's policies and procedures; enable the service to deliver good quality services to residents in line with the council's corporate objectives; and provide wellbeing support and the necessary training and development opportunities to staff.

4.4. Financial planning and management

Corporately, the council has a MTFP in place and service budgets have been agreed

and are being monitored. Capital investments are considered as part of the MTFP process. The peer team was assured that the waste service budgets have been managed well, with some notable improvements driven over recent years including work to reduce trade debt and the further development of commercial opportunities. The waste service's budgets are performing close to the target and any variations to budgets are discussed by the service team and corporate finance staff. There have also been discussions about adequately funding the vehicle replacement programme. Therefore, there is a clear understanding corporately and within waste services of its financial position and plans are in place to address financial challenges.


Waste services all over the country are operating in challenging circumstances as a result of national waste reforms, budget reductions, requirements to deliver against climate change and emission targets, commercialisation of some types of waste services, rising levels of household and trade waste, and increasing customer expectations.

These challenges invariably put pressure on finances and require efficiency and savings targets to be met. Waste services in South Tyneside have also been trying to balance these competing demands and has been putting in place reforms to change its operating model with good intent. However, the implementation of these changes has not helped the current position and operational staff have commented that communication, consultation and engagement could be improved.

The peer team believe these issues are resolvable and there is willingness among all stakeholders to work together to achieve this. Some of the actions the peer team has recommended can be implemented with minimum or small investments and there is financial leeway within the council to support this.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

The council is on an improvement journey and has a positive corporate approach to modernisation and change across the organisation. This corporate approach now needs to be translated into improvements within waste services through a review of policies and procedures to ensure they align with corporate objectives, and that adequate corporate expertise is provided to assist implementation.



The peer team found staff within the waste services to be motivated and determined to provide the best services they can. They have demonstrated willingness and appetite to bring about improvements by changing the way they operate. However, organisational change and improvements needs to be handled sensitively and they require the organisation to take people along with them through good communication, consultation, engagement and collaboration. There appears to be a training and personal development gap in this area within waste services. This should be addressed so that when implementing change and improvements these are in line with corporate policies and procedures.

Therefore, personal development opportunities for staff across the service should be considered alongside the appraisal process and service training and development plan. There are also opportunities to work with professional bodies as well as other councils to learn from best practice and improve service performance. There are offers from organisations such as APSE and neighbouring councils to help the service to put in place some of the basics around behaviour and standards charters, baseline of performance data, the development of a modern ways of working strategy, and the sharing of operating models. The peer team would encourage managers within waste services to seize these opportunities at the earliest.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge.

In the meantime, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber and North East, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires. His contact details are: Email: mark.edgell@local.gov.uk Tel: 07747 636 910.



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(On behalf of the peer challenge team)