

Local Authority of the Year

Aberdeen City Council: Transformation in Action

Summary

During a period of stark public sector challenges, financial constraints and economic uncertainty, Aberdeen City Council has led from the front.

The Council is driving the most significant period of transformation in the city's history, radically enhancing the built environment through a £1billion capital programme and driving social and cultural change with significant investment in communities, education, arts and events.

Unprecedented change is being underpinned by the most ambitious and comprehensive redesign of the Council's structure and approach to service delivery ever undertaken, as we embrace innovation in demand management to build the council of the future and become an exemplar local authority.

The perfect storm

Aberdeen City Council is driving transformation against a backdrop of rising demand for public services, evolving customer needs and increasing financial pressures. In 2019/20 alone efficiencies of £41.2million were identified to bridge a funding gap created by reduced grant funding and rising costs.

At a time of contraction in public sector funding, Aberdeen has endured a perfect storm as a downturn in the dominant oil and gas industry took hold. From its peak in 2014, more than 150,000 jobs have been lost across the UK, many in Aberdeen.

The Council's response has been bold and effective, reflecting our faith in the people and place. The groundwork for recovery was laid early on, and the fruits of that foresight are now being harvested.

In 2016 the Aberdeen City Region Deal was signed, valued at £826m over 10 years. Partners include the UK Government, Scottish Government, Aberdeenshire Council and private sector organisation Opportunity North East. Projects include a bio-therapeutic hub and fibre connectivity, with plans for a food and drink hub.

Aberdeen City Council became the first local authority in Scotland to issue bonds on the London Stock Exchange, raising £370m to support capital projects, winning plaudits in finance and local government spheres.

An independent panel formed to advise on economic performance recently hailed an improving picture, citing the potential for inclusive growth through continuing diversification. The panel suggested Aberdeen was ideally positioned to lead the transition to net zero emissions across key sectors in addition to taking a national lead on improving wellbeing.

Changing the built environment

Our commercial approach is evidenced by the award-winning £107m Marischal Square, a vibrant leisure and office development delivered in partnership with Aviva and Muse on the site of Council's former headquarters, that is helping to regenerate the city centre.

Marischal Square is but one component of a capital programme led by the Council – with 8 August 2019 a red-letter day as The Event Complex Aberdeen (TECA) was opened. The largest new entertainment complex in Europe and the biggest single investment (in excess of £300m) in a venue of its type in Britain, it is a symbol of the city's renaissance. Estimated returns include an additional 4.5 million visitors, £113m of visitor spend, £63m net Gross Value Added to the economy over 10 year, and in excess of 352 FTE jobs.

The launch was a milestone in a programme including:

- More than £30m invested in the restoration and expansion of Aberdeen Art Gallery to create a world class attraction;
- £25m redevelopment of Union Terrace Gardens in the heart of the city;
- Comprehensive package of roads infrastructure, including £70m investment in the city bypass;
- Creation of a unique attraction at the historic Provost Skene's House;
- Refurbishment of the iconic Music Hall;
- A pioneering hydrogen fuel programme, bringing refuelling and manufacturing infrastructure and Europe's largest hydrogen bus fleet.

Work will start this year on the redevelopment of Queen Street, which aims to deliver more than 300 new homes alongside a civic hub. The project represents a radical approach to placemaking and integrated public sector service delivery by the Council and its partners, including the police and the courts, that will help achieve the goals of the city's Local Outcome Improvement Plan.

Social infrastructure

Aberdeen City Council is also investing in the fabric of our communities.

We are undertaking the largest programme of new Council house building in more than half a century as 2,000 new homes are delivered. Three new schools have opened in the past two school years and four more are in the pipeline in addition to a network of community hubs to support a wide range of projects – including the introduction of free school meals for children in regeneration areas during school holidays, an approach replicated by other councils.

Cultural change is also high on the agenda, with the Aberdeen 365 events strategy creating a calendar of critically acclaimed attractions which have garnered hundreds of thousands of

local, regional, national and international visitors. Aberdeen's festival of light Spectra, the ground-breaking Nuart street art festival and mass participation events including the Great Aberdeen Run have all been introduced.

Focus on outcomes

The Council, as indicated, is also transforming. A new Target Operating Model was adopted in 2017 and the benefits of organisational restructuring and the deployment of new technologies are now being realised.

The transition to the new model has included:

- Appointment of a new senior leadership team;
- Inviting staff to create new guiding principles for the Council;
- A new transformation portfolio, structured around clearly defined organisational capabilities;
- A new focus on demand management and business intelligence;
- Putting a flexible and adaptable workforce at the heart of the evolution, creating training and development opportunities.

The model embraces technology to better meet the needs of customers whilst delivering essential financial efficiencies. It also capitalises on opportunities for increased partnership working, demonstrated by the establishment of an active community planning partnership with Police Scotland, NHS Grampian, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations.

The 10-year Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) was developed with partners and presents a clear framework for us all to deliver outcome-based, integrated services to support individuals and communities. Council budget options are aligned closely to the LOIP with cross-party political support for the partnership and the multi-agency group chaired by Council Co-Leader Cllr Jenny Laing.

LOIP successes include:

- Introduction of the Choose Life app, contributing to a 28% decrease in suicides;
- Narrowing the attainment gap between the highest and lowest-achieving 20% of children, with more entering positive destinations;
- 8% increase in people who reported that they feel safe in the city and a reduction in crime;
- Entry into Unicef's Child Friendly Partners programme;
- Expansion of participatory budgeting, giving people a direct say in how public funds are used to address local needs.

The Aberdeen Health and Social Care Partnership, with strong political and officer leadership, has been pivotal in tackling health inequalities and improving outcomes with validation through inspection and key indicators demonstrating the achievements of the model.

Technology as a driver for positive change

More than ever we need to be smart about how we do business. More than ever we can. Digital infrastructure is revolutionising how public sector services can be accessed, allowing people to interact with their environment in new and more direct ways.

Our Digital First programme is evolving at pace with more than 100 new platforms (moving paper forms online) rolled out in 2018/19 alone and an ambitious schedule of development and implementation continuing in 2019/20.

By way of example, in January 2019 Aberdeen City Council became the first local authority in Scotland to launch both school admissions and placing requests for all school types as a fully online process. The project was initiated by the Integrated Children's and Family

Service cluster, which had previously used more than half a dozen forms to capture over 120 data items.

The Integrated Children's and Family Services, Governance, Customer Experience, External Communications and Digital and Technology clusters worked together to deliver the platform – demonstrating the Council's collaborative approach to its Digital First ethos.

The online platform enables customers to self-serve in areas including enrolments for P1 pupils; placing requests for all mainstream schools; placing requests for additional support needs (ASN) schools; application management; waiting list updates; and correspondence with the Council.

More than 450 applications were made on the first day of launching and more than 2,500 applications within the first month. By the March deadline, 100% of applications in the city were completed online using the new system. To ensure digital inclusion, libraries provided support for customers to access online service, meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty by supporting vulnerable service users and those with protected characteristics.

This end to end digital process, which provides assurance on compliance with legislative requirements, is the first of its kind in Scotland and a symbol of the innovation taking place in all areas of Council business.

In August 2019 we became the first council in the country to collaborate with Microsoft to use its Cloud Navigator plan. The partnership is helping to fundamentally change the way services are delivered. Artificial Intelligence is being used to support better engagement with customers and free staff to spend time on the issues that affect communities, whilst improving job satisfaction.

People remain at the heart of everything we do, an approach enshrined in the LOIP.

A maturing customer relationship

Delivering efficiencies and best value is one element of our response to our straitened financial position. Revenue generation is another.

In 2019 Aberdeen City Council rolled out an annual £30 garden waste collection charge, the service having previously been provided free to 50,000 households. The Council was not obligated to deliver the service – but neither were people obligated to sign up.

A comprehensive communications plan was implemented, utilising channels like the popular Council Gardener video blog (with demonstrations of home composting options) to a live Facebook Q&A session. In candidly explaining the process and the rationale behind it, we sought to subtly shift our relationship with the customer, looking to the community to take greater ownership of recycling.

The results vindicated our progressive approach with more than 1,000 sign-ups on the first day, and £934,000 of revenue generated within the first two months, exceeding the initial full-year income target.

The garden waste subscription campaign reaffirms the power of cross-council collaboration in delivering on goals defined at an organisational level, with the waste and recycling team having worked hand in hand with the external communications.

Partnership, partnership, partnership...

Our Partnership approach to service delivery is perfectly demonstrated in the creation of Aberdeen Communities Together (ACT), an umbrella for individuals, groups and organisations with a shared goal of maintaining and improving Aberdeen's award-winning parks and green spaces.

The Council's team has worked tirelessly alongside more than 150 community partners and over 1,000 individuals, fostering a new wave of civic pride. Staff have embraced the opportunity to share knowledge. The formation of ACT has also opened access to external funding, leveraged income through sponsorship.

Achievements in the past year include:

- More collaboration with communities and schools than ever before in helping deliver a £500,000 programme of play area refurbishments;
- 32 schools involved in a food growing programme;
- 200,000 spring bulbs planted by over 100 different groups;
- The development of the Branching Out programme for adults who use mental health services;
- Working in partnership with the Early Years team to develop outdoor nurseries, a first for a Scottish local authority;
- Making use of park buildings as out of school clubs, creating young park ambassadors;
- More groups in the “It’s Your Neighbourhood” scheme than any other local authority in Scotland;
- A close working partnership with RSPB, with Aberdeen established as the best European city to view dolphins.

Aberdeen came top in its category at the Royal Horticultural Society UK Britain In Bloom and earning a Discretionary Award for showing excellence in growing communities. ACT also won gold at the 2019 Beautiful Scotland awards.

In Conclusion

If public sector reform is about empowering people and stakeholders to do more, it requires those in elevated positions to accept the counsel of those on the ground. We have been genuinely receptive to the ideas percolating upwards, listening to what works locally.

As with everything we do, the ACT initiative ties back to the aims and objectives of the Local Outcome Improvement Plan, which was based on a Population Needs Assessment and maps

out the way in which multi-agency partners can work together to ensure Aberdeen is a place where all people can prosper, regardless of their background or circumstances.

The LOIP recognises that no single sector or profession can alone improve outcomes for people and place – nor any single local authority.

Our attachment isn't to old buildings and boundaries but to new shared purpose – meeting long term economic, social and green goals – and to the ideology and policies underpinning that. When it comes to asset management, we are adopting the same visionary approach being taken to organisational restructuring and service redesign, not least because these things are inextricably linked.

Increasingly, both the UK and Scottish governments' approach to economic growth is being founded on the placemaking described here – and with good reason. The evidence shows successful countries are powered by successful regions, and successful regions anchored by dynamic, inclusive cities.

Aberdeen City Council has been determined to demonstrate the same confidence and commitment shown by the private sector and partners by fully doing our bit – providing quality homes for key workers; improving the public realm; creating the conditions where innovation can continue to flourish; building a regional capital that can compete globally for the best talent whilst always accommodating the disadvantaged.

Together we are weathering the perfect storm.

The transformation of our Council and city, guided by the LOIP, driven by the adoption of the new Target Operating Model, is embracing new ways of working across the organisation – from back office processes to frontline service delivery – to build an organisation radically different to any that has served Aberdeen before or indeed any local authority in the UK.