LGA Governance Peer Review

City of Doncaster Council

8th to 10th September 2026

Feedback report



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1. Introduction

A team of local government peers, drawn together by the Local Government Association (LGA), delivered a Governance Peer Review of the City of Doncaster Council from Tuesday 8th to Thursday 10th September 2026 inclusive.

Peer review is a well-established, respected and valued improvement and assurance tool that provides robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils. It is delivered by the sector for the sector and forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the LGA to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These principles state that councils are responsible for their own performance; accountable locally, not nationally; share a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector; and can look to the LGA to provide the tools to support them.

Peer review is delivered by a team of senior local government councillor and officer peers. They consider key background information in advance of the review, including a Position Statement prepared by the council setting out the local context and highlighting areas for the peer team to focus on. They then spend time at the council gathering evidence, information and views through meeting council officers, elected members and external partners. This helps them build a rounded picture of the council's strengths and areas for improvement. The peer team provides robust, strategic and credible challenge and support.

The peer team in Doncaster consisted of experienced and knowledgeable senior local government elected members and officers (see section four). They provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

This report provides the City of Doncaster Council with feedback on the peer team's findings, identifies ways forward and outlines a set of related recommendations. The council is committed to publishing the report by the end of October 2026. Alongside the report, the council will publish an action plan which responds to the recommendations.

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We would wish to put on record our thanks to the team of council officers who supported us wonderfully well both in advance of and during the peer review.

Scope and focus

The purpose of the governance peer review was to:

- Provide independent assurance on the effectiveness of the council's governance arrangements
- Identify opportunities to strengthen governance, decision-making and organisational culture
- Support continuous improvement and ensure that governance arrangements remain fit for the next phase of Doncaster's development

The key lines of enquiry that the peer team followed were:

- Governance and decision-making
- Audit, risk and assurance
- Scrutiny and challenge
- Member/officer relationships
- Members' roles in their communities
- Statutory officers and governance leadership
- Organisational culture and behaviours

Leading on from the peer review

The recommendations that emerge from the peer review are intended to form a key part of the focus of the independently-chaired Governance Improvement Panel that the council is convening.

A progress review will be undertaken by the peer team at the most beneficial and appropriate moment, and reported on, within the next twelve months.

2. Executive summary

The council and the peer team recognise that the council's governance arrangements and overall functioning have been sound going back over quite a number of years. Those arrangements have, however, been significantly tested since

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the elections in May 2025 as an influx of new councillors has brought new perspectives and shifted the cultural dynamics of the council, particularly at the senior officer and elected member level.

The council produced a Position Statement to inform the work of the peer team, outlining the way the council perceives the situation now in relation to governance, the challenges that exist and priority areas for improvement. All political groups on the council were engaged in collective discussions with officers to shape the Position Statement. The peer team's view is that the council's assessment is largely accurate and reflects good self-awareness on the part of the organisation. We endorse the document's conclusions and suggestions. We outline a set of recommendations in section three of this report. These recommendations are a combination of points of reinforcement of what the organisation has proposed and additional measures that we recommend the council takes.

Our approach as a peer team has deliberately been to avoid judging and refereeing perceived 'rights and wrongs'. Linked to this, it is perhaps beneficial to highlight that during our discussions of what has been experienced over the last sixteen months, there has seldom been a singular, shared view on any given situation or issue.

Relationships have been badly eroded amongst a small cohort of people at the senior leadership level politically and managerially and trust has been eroded between a significant proportion, but not all, of the elected membership and the senior officer leadership. Opportunities have been created to develop understanding, engagement and relationships but some of these have not been taken up to the extent that they should have been. That said, the participation of the different political groups in the council's Executive Board and Team Doncaster Executive is very positive.

There appears to be a lack of acceptance of the realities of what the democratic outcomes from the elections mean, in terms of decision-making within an Elected Mayor model, for a political group with a large majority on the council. There also seems to be a lack of understanding of how that large majority can still be influential and impactful.

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What is being experienced in terms of negatively-impacted relationships has not spread beyond a small cohort of people at the senior leadership level. The atmosphere within the wider council appears unaffected and the organisation is continuing to function effectively. Where relationships have eroded at the senior level, the negative impacts are clearly significant in terms of some people's well-being.

What is taking place is acting as a very major capacity drain at the senior level, both politically and managerially. In addition, reputational damage is being done to the council. We would encourage all those involved to acknowledge that different paths could have been taken and there is learning to be drawn. People being reflective in relation to such matters would facilitate a collective 'stepping back' and the adoption of refreshed and more positive stances and approaches.

A small number of elected members, in different political groups, are viewing government intervention as the desired outcome from what is taking place. The 'corporate memory' of Doncaster being subject to intervention in the period from 2010 to late 2014 is still strong and only a very small minority would wish to see it repeated.

Doncaster Sheffield airport was prominent in the elections and represents a key area of political contention. The External Auditor has clear expectations around meaningful progress on the governance arrangements for the airport being reported by the council in October. What emerges around this needs to be reported to all councillors and interested parties.

The council's Audit Committee also represents one of the most 'contested' areas of governance. We recommend that the council uses the imminent appointment of co-opted independent members as a 're-set' moment for the Audit Committee; implements the Local Government Association's offer and delivery package, which stands ready to be rolled out, of external training for committee members; and ensures the effective undertaking of meetings and consistent attendance by all members of the committee.

Realising the influence of the majority group on the council depends upon them

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having an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding of the council's governance arrangements and how to utilise them to positive effect. It also depends upon them having clarity of political ambition and, through this, providing council officers with the insight and understanding to support them effectively in seeking to fulfil their democratic mandate. We recommend that the council establishes a shadow Cabinet arrangement, underpinned by absolute clarity and shared understanding of its (non-decision-making) role and remit, and ensures policy support to the majority group to aid the articulation of their ambitions for Doncaster.

The budget-setting process represents another key area where, very visibly and very divisively, tensions have been played out. We recommend that the council creates the opportunity for a cross-party budget development process and ensures all the political groups on the council are adequately supported by officers in being able to contribute constructively to the budget process and have the necessary insight and understanding to put forward proposals and take decisions that are fully informed.

A council's Overview and Scrutiny function provides opportunity across the elected membership, including enhancing accountability of the Executive and helping to shape policy and secure improved outcomes for local people. The Overview and Scrutiny function and committees in Doncaster need to move onto a more effective and strategic footing.

It is important for the council to ensure all the necessary training and development is put in place for elected members in ways that they find accessible – and that all councillors demonstrate the necessary commitment to undertaking it. This is key in any council but even more so in a context of the elections seeing 39 out of 56 councillors in Doncaster entering local government for the first time. There is learning to draw from the approach adopted to the induction of councillors last year and support is readily available within the council for any councillor finding it difficult to navigate how to fulfil their role to greatest effect.

We gleaned frustration amongst some councillors we met with aspects of the council's Constitution. In order to provide councillors with both insight and a way of positively channelling their thoughts and ideas, we recommend that the council establishes an independently chaired cross-party Constitution reference group. The

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review of Council Procedure Rules agreed by Full Council in April this year should form part of the work of the group.

The council already has a Member/Officer Protocol in place. We recommend that work takes place to co-design a strengthened version of this. There should be a strong focus on behaviours and it should support a clear distinction of respective roles and boundaries and promote mutual respect.

One of the most contentious areas since the elections has been the divergence of views and understanding around which information was or should have been shared by officers with which elected members, at what points and through which channels. There is a risk that this situation becomes more fraught and self-reinforcing as officers become more cautious about sharing information. This risk needs to be averted – an environment needs to be created in which information flows more readily and openly. Elected members can only make good, informed decisions on complex and contentious issues if they have been able to see all the relevant information, within the legal rules on access to information and confidentiality. The council needs to ensure it is confident and sound on the basis with which it is decided what is appropriate to share, when, how and who with.

What we have outlined in this report in terms of ways forward will only work if those involved are willing to engage constructively, are committed to moving forwards and recognise and fulfil their responsibilities. For those who can't make the necessary commitment, we would recommend that they consider their continuing role. As one individual the peer team met outlined, the requirement is for senior leaders to "work together, we're all in it for Doncaster".

3. Recommendations

The following are the peer team's key recommendations:

3.1 Doncaster Sheffield airport governance

Resolve the issue of Doncaster Sheffield airport in relation to both its internal and external governance arrangements. The External Auditor has clear expectations around meaningful progress on the governance arrangements being reported in

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October. What emerges around this needs to be reported to all councillors and interested parties as soon as is feasible.

3.2 Annual Governance Statement

Agree and formally sign off the Annual Governance Statement, at the latest by the January 2027 'back stop' date

3.3 Audit Committee

Use the imminent appointment of co-opted independent members as a 're-set' moment for the Audit Committee; implement the LGA offer for external training; and ensure effective undertaking of meetings and consistent attendance by all members of the committee

3.4 Shadow Cabinet

Establish a shadow Cabinet arrangement with dedicated portfolio holders and formalised ways of operating – underpinned by absolute clarity and shared understanding of the (non-decision-making) role and remit of that arrangement, in a context of a directly-elected Mayor and their appointed Cabinet

3.5 Policy support to the majority political group

Through an appropriate arrangement, provide policy support to Reform UK as the majority political group on the council – with a core aspect of this being aiding the articulation of their ambitions for Doncaster

3.6 Cross-party budget development process

Create the opportunity for a cross-party budget development process and ensure all the political groups on the council are adequately supported by officers in being able to contribute constructively to the budget process and have the necessary insight and understanding to put forward proposals and take decisions that are fully informed

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3.7 Overview and Scrutiny

Enable Overview and Scrutiny Committees to move onto a more effective and strategic footing, enabling greater holding to account of the Executive; robust scrutiny of budget proposals and budget spend; increased emphasis on 'forward looking' policy development; and a focus on the most pertinent issues for Doncaster and the council

3.8 Elected member training and development

Ensure all the necessary training and development is put in place for elected members in ways that they find accessible. A core aspect of this should be mentoring arrangements for all those new to leadership roles, including shadow portfolio holders. At the same time, there must be a greater willingness on the part of elected members to participate in training and development.

3.9 Cross-party Constitution reference group

Establish an independently chaired cross-party Constitution reference group, working with the Monitoring Officer, pooling experience, thinking, ideas and learning from across the elected membership. The review of Council Procedure Rules agreed by Full Council should form part of the work of that group.

3.10 Member/Officer Protocol

Co-design a strengthened Member/Officer Protocol – with a strong focus on behaviours and to support a clear distinction of respective roles and boundaries and to promote mutual respect. Activity around this could form part of the work of the Constitution reference group.

3.11 Elected members' enquiries

Build on the solid foundations of 'Councillor Online' to ensure that the system for dealing with elected members' enquiries works for everybody and ensures a 'one route in' approach

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3.12 Executive Leadership Team and statutory officers

Move to a position in which the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer become standing members of the Executive Leadership Team

3.13 Information flow

Develop a climate in which information flows more readily and openly to elected members, within the legal rules on access to information and confidentiality. As a key aspect of this, ensure that regular meetings take place between the Chief Executive and political group leaders both individually and collectively.

3.14 Engagement with trade unions

Establish more regular arrangements for the Mayor and Chief Executive to meet formally with trade unions

3.15 "Work together, we're all in it for Doncaster"

For those at the senior leadership level, both politically and managerially, who can't make the commitment to engaging constructively, moving forwards and recognising and fulfilling their responsibilities, we would recommend that they consider their continuing role.

4. Peer team

The composition of the peer team was shaped by the specific context and focus of the council, with the LGA selecting peers based on their relevant background and expertise. The peers for the governance peer review were:

- Stephen Young, Chief Executive, Salford City Council
- Caroline Woodley, former Elected Mayor of Hackney (Labour)
- Councillor Andrew Husband, Leader of Durham County Council (Reform UK)
- Councillor Richard Clewer, former Leader of Wiltshire Council (Conservative)
- Charlotte Benjamin, Corporate Director of Legal and Corporate Services

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and Monitoring Officer, Middlesbrough Council

- Chris Bowron, Peer Review Manager, Local Government Association

5. Key findings

5.1 Overall reflections

The council's 2022 corporate peer challenge identified governance and decision-making as a particular strength, with clear and effective arrangements, transparent decision-making, robust checks and balances, effective scrutiny and positive member-officer relationships. The council's Position Statement outlines where the organisation finds itself now in relation to governance, the challenges that exist and where improvement is required.

The following is re-produced from the Position Statement and provides a summary of the way the council perceives the situation. All political groups on the council were engaged in collective discussions with officers to shape the Position Statement.

Assessment area: Governance and decision-making		
In 2022, governance and decision-making were a highlighted strength, we had clear and effective governance arrangements, transparent decision-making, robust checks and balances, effective scrutiny and positive member-officer relationships.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Comprehensive constitutional and decision-making framework, supported by documented routes, delegated authority and professional governance advice.	Consistent interpretation and application of constitutional roles, decision routes and committee authority.	Build shared governance understanding, secure earlier advice and resolve complex or disputed issues proportionately.
Assessment area: Audit, risk and assurance		

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In 2022 audit, risk and assurance were working well. The Audit Committee was effective and provided appropriate challenge and assurance, supported by clear strategic risk-management arrangements.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Established audit, risk and assurance arrangements, with positive internal and external assurance and formal risk oversight.	Confidence in assurance conclusions, committee remit, attendance and the appropriate route for governance concerns.	Clarify the distinction between oversight, assurance and investigation, supported by informed engagement and effective committee practice.
Assessment area: Scrutiny and challenge		
In 2022, scrutiny and challenge worked well and was supported. Overview and Scrutiny benefited from deep-dive panels, regular engagement with decision-makers and partner involvement.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Active scrutiny structures with dedicated officer support, access to decision-makers and experience of examining major policies and decisions.	Consistent use, timing, participation and visible impact of scrutiny as the principal forum for detailed challenge.	Strengthen early engagement, evidence-led work programming and tracking of recommendations, influence and outcomes.
Assessment area: Member-officer relationships		
In 2022, member-officer relationships were strong, supportive and productive, relationships were underpinned by good member development and a clear focus on collective outcomes.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Clear protocols and many constructive relationships across service, locality and	Trust, confidence in professional advice, information sharing and	Rebuild trust through relationship development, shared role clarity, respectful

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community settings.	practical understanding of respective roles and boundaries.	challenge and consistent behaviours.
Assessment area: Members' role in their communities		
In 2022, members were recognised as key community leaders, with a growing role in empowering communities, supporting ward-based activity and strengthening connections with the Council.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Established support for members as community leaders, including ward arrangements, budgets, networks, casework and officer advice.	Consistency of visibility, participation and evidence showing how community insight influences governance and decisions.	Strengthen member development, community connection and evidence of impact, while reinforcing the boundary between advocacy and operational delivery.
Assessment area: Statutory officers and Governance Leadership		
In 2022, Leadership was a major strength. Political and managerial leadership was described as stable, visible and well regarded inside and outside the organisation. The 2022 Peer Review did not identify a separate assessment specifically for statutory officers.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Experienced and visible statutory officers who continued to provide independent advice, challenge, escalation and governance leadership.	Confidence in independent advice, timely engagement and the capacity impact of repeated clarification.	Enable earlier access to coordinated statutory advice, constructive consideration of that advice and clear routes for challenge and escalation.
Assessment area: Organisational Culture and behaviours		
In 2022, we had a strong and positive can-do culture, staff were committed,		

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motivated, resilient and proud of the organisation. The Council was encouraged to develop further its continuous reflection and honest organisational self-critique.		
What remains strong	**What has been tested**	**Improvement focus**
Resilient service delivery, established organisational values, staff engagement routes and many professional working relationships.	Trust, openness, communication, wellbeing and the ability to sustain constructive relationships during disagreement.	Embed consistent standards, joint learning, appropriate routes for challenge and measurable cultural and behavioural improvement.

The peer team's view is that this assessment is largely accurate and reflects good self-awareness on the part of the council. The council and the peer team recognise that the council's governance arrangements and overall functioning have been sound going back over quite a number of years. Those arrangements have, however, been significantly tested since the elections in May 2025 as an influx of new councillors has brought new perspectives and shifted the cultural dynamics of the council, particularly at the senior officer and elected member level.

The council has received positive external assessments in key spheres in recent years. 'Good' judgements were received in 2025 from both Ofsted in relation to children's social care and the Care Quality Commission in relation to adult social care. In the most recent Annual Audit Letter, for the financial year ending 31st March 2025, the External Auditor indicated that they anticipated providing an 'Unqualified' audit opinion. Such judgements, in our view, are unlikely to be received by a council unless it has sound governance arrangements and functions effectively as a 'corporate body'.

The outcomes of the two sets of elections (mayoral and full council) last year have created an unusual situation in local government, with a Labour Directly Elected Mayor and Labour Cabinet appointed to support her, and a council elected membership with a large Reform UK majority. Whilst unusual, this is not unprecedented. Indeed, Doncaster experienced a similar situation (albeit the political

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make-up was different) in a period covering the late 2000s and early 2010s.

The atmosphere of political contestation since May 2025 has manifested itself in a testing of the council's governance arrangements. Such testing would likely have revealed aspects of any council's equivalent arrangements on which there would be differing views and that may be appropriate for revision and enhancement.

Our approach as a peer team has deliberately been to avoid judging and refereeing perceived 'rights and wrongs'. Linked to this, it is perhaps beneficial to highlight that during our discussions of what has been experienced over the last sixteen months, there has seldom been a singular, shared view on any given situation or issue.

The peer team's efforts have focused on gleaning the potential and scope for improvement and identifying tangible ways in which that can be brought about. What has emerged from this is outlined in Section 6 of this report: 'Ways forward – areas of focus and recommendations'.

5.2 Key themes

A number of key themes have emerged in relation to what we have explored. Some of these re-emphasise aspects of the council's findings in its Position Statement whilst others supplement them.

The first of these themes is that relationships have been badly eroded amongst a small cohort of people at the senior leadership level politically and managerially. This has contributed to a situation in which, within those relationships, people are assuming the worst of one another and there is evidence of defensive behaviours. Additionally, trust has been eroded between a significant proportion, but not all, of the elected membership and the senior officer leadership.

Another key theme is that opportunities have been created in a range of spheres to develop understanding, engagement and relationships but a pattern has emerged of some of those not being taken up to the extent that they should have been between councillors and officers.

This does not mean that there aren't good examples of opportunities having been taken up. The participation of the Reform UK, Conservative and Independent Voices

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for Doncaster political group leaders in the council's Executive Board (the equivalent of informal cabinet meetings in other councils) and the Team Doncaster Executive is very positive. Such participation follows invitations from the Mayor, with the support of her Cabinet. The active participation of the Leaders and Deputy Leaders of all the political groups in regular meetings with senior officers, including the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer, is also very positive.

If the take up of opportunities to develop understanding, engagement and relationships could become the norm, and participation more widespread, that would be beneficial to the council and its functioning. This applies particularly to training and development for elected members, which we explore in more detail later in this report.

A further theme relates to what appears to be a lack of acceptance of the realities of what the democratic outcomes from the May 2025 elections mean, in terms of decision-making within an Elected Mayor model, for a political group with a large majority on the council. There also seems to be a lack of understanding of how that large majority can still be influential and impactful. We expand upon, and suggest ways forward around, this theme later in this report.

It is positive to highlight that what is being experienced in terms of negatively-impacted relationships has not spread beyond that small cohort of people at the senior leadership level. The atmosphere within the wider council, including relationships between elected members and officers, appears unaffected and the organisation is continuing to function effectively.

That said, amongst those where relationships have eroded at the senior level, the negative impacts are clearly significant in terms of some people's well-being. This is a cause of concern for themselves and their families. Things have simply gone too far.

Anecdotally, there seems to be a lack of fulfilment and enjoyment of roles amongst a wider group of people, including elected members. As people we met highlighted – both officers and councillors – they came into local government to make a positive difference. This is being undermined by some of the behaviours that they see or

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experience; governance arrangements not being channelled for constructive purposes sufficiently often; and limitations upon some elected members' awareness of how to be positively impactful.

What is taking place is acting as a very major capacity drain at the senior level, both politically and managerially. There has inevitably been 'opportunity cost' in relation to the resources (both human and financial) that have been absorbed by the issues that have emerged in the last sixteen months. In addition, reputational damage is being done to the council. External partners that we met highlighted the situation as negatively impacting the council's engagement, speed of decision-making and delivery.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the role of the ward councillor is being devalued, with a proportion of elected members seen not to be fulfilling their representative role adequately enough – whether as a result of a lack of understanding of the role or an under-estimation of the commitments involved when standing for election and insufficient motivation, time or capacity to fulfil them.

The final theme to highlight is the fact that a small number of elected members, in different political groups, are viewing government intervention as the desired outcome from what is taking place. The 'corporate memory' of what Doncaster experienced in the period from 2010 to late 2014 is still strong and only a very small minority would wish to see it repeated.

6. Ways forward – areas of focus and recommendations

The council, in its Position Statement, outlines a number of 'Key findings and suggested priorities for improvement' from review activity it has undertaken on a cross-party basis. We re-produce these here as follows:

1. Building trust and confidence*: The strongest cross-cutting theme is the need to build trust between some members and officers and strengthen confidence in governance processes, professional advice and information sharing.*

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***2. Shared understanding of roles and responsibilities**: The review period exposed inconsistent understanding of statutory officer roles, committee remits, scrutiny responsibilities, delegated authority and the distinction between member advocacy and operational management.*

***3. Constructive and proportionate challenge**: The Council should strengthen awareness of what good challenge looks like and therefore increase confidence that constructive challenge is welcomed, evidence-led and routed through the most appropriate forum, including Overview and Scrutiny, Audit Committee, Full Council and statutory officer channels.*

***4. Standards, behaviours and accountability**: The Council has codes and protocols in place, but concerns about behaviour, inconsistent engagement and visible accountability persist.*

***5. Quality of decision-making information**: There is an opportunity to continuously improve report quality, clarity, options appraisal, evidence, risks and plain English so that members and officers are consistently supported to make informed decisions.*

***6. Assurance and governance confidence**: Audit, risk and assurance arrangements remain sound, but repeated disputes, procedural disruption, inconsistent engagement and repeated legal clarification affected confidence in how those arrangements operate. Confidence needs to be restored through clearer roles, proportionality and shared understanding.*

***7. Evidence of impact**: The Council can strengthen evidence showing how scrutiny, community leadership, member development and governance improvement activity influence decisions, outcomes and organisational learning.*

As a peer team, we endorse these conclusions and suggestions. We outline below a combination of points of reinforcement of what the organisation has proposed and additional measures that we recommend the council takes.

From our discussions, it is clear that there is recognition that things could have been done differently on all 'sides' in the period since the elections. We do not propose anything along the lines of a 'reconciliation' process but we would encourage all those involved to acknowledge, whether openly or tacitly, that different paths could

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have been taken and there is learning to be drawn. People being reflective in relation to such matters would facilitate a collective 'stepping back' and the adoption of refreshed and more positive stances and approaches. The commitment that political group leaders gave to issuing a joint statement upon the conclusion of the governance peer review reflected the ethos we are encouraging.

There are two specific recommendations that we highlight at the outset, purely because they fall into a category of having clear timescales that are being set externally.

- The first is to resolve the issue of Doncaster Sheffield airport in relation to both its internal and external governance arrangements. The airport, because of its prominence in the elections, is representing a key area of political contention. The External Auditor has clear expectations around meaningful progress on the governance arrangements being reported by the council in October. What emerges around this needs to be reported to all councillors and interested parties.
- The second is to agree and formally sign off the council's Annual Governance Statement. Whilst it has been published in draft form along with the council's draft statement of accounts, it needs to be agreed and formally signed off, at the latest, by the January 2027 'back stop' date set by Regulation. This will require constructive dialogue and fits with the notion of everybody taking a 'step back', seeing the 'bigger picture' and jointly agreeing areas for improvement.

Along with the arrangements for the airport, the council's Audit Committee is one of the most 'contested' areas of governance. This is despite the 2022 corporate peer challenge indicating that the Audit Committee worked well, was effective and provided appropriate challenge and assurance. The activity of the committee has been disrupted or delayed through a number of meetings being cancelled, inquorate or rescheduled at various points in recent months. We recommend that the council:

- Uses the imminent appointment of co-opted independent members as a 're-set' moment for the Audit Committee

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- Implements the Local Government Association's offer and delivery package, which stands ready to be rolled out, of external training for committee members
- Ensures the effective undertaking of meetings and consistent attendance by all members of the committee

Our next recommendations link to what we outlined earlier in relation to a political group (Reform UK) with a large majority on the council having the potential still to be influential and impactful within a governance model featuring an Elected Mayor who is of a different political persuasion. That political group, with 34 out of 56 elected members, has been given a democratic mandate by those voting in the council elections and it is incumbent upon the group to be as effective as possible in seeking to fulfil that.

Realising their influence effectively as a majority group depends upon having an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding of the council's governance arrangements and how to utilise them to positive effect. This includes Overview and Scrutiny and the positions of influence they have on the council's Executive Board and the partnership-level Team Doncaster Executive. It also depends upon having clarity of political ambition and, through this, providing council officers with the insight and understanding to support them effectively in seeking to fulfil their democratic mandate – as would be the case with any majority political group on any council. As a peer team, we did not glean any sense through our discussions of what those political ambitions are.

We make two interlinked recommendations to the council here:

- Establish a shadow Cabinet arrangement with dedicated portfolio holders and formalised ways of operating. Such ways of operating should include regular officer briefings for the portfolio holders aligned with their services and functions and the provision of access to all appropriate sources of information. The shadow Cabinet arrangement needs to be underpinned by absolute clarity and shared understanding of its (non-decision-making) role and remit, in a context of a directly-elected Mayor and their appointed Cabinet.

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- Provide, through an appropriate arrangement, policy support to the majority group on the council. A core aspect of this should be aiding the articulation of the group's ambitions for Doncaster.

The budget-setting process represents another key area where, very visibly and very divisively, tensions have been played out. What transpired in the setting of the budget for 2026/27 negatively impacted both the reputation and financial planning of the council. In a context of there being two absolutely legitimate political mandates for two different political persuasions in Doncaster, attempting to find 'common ground' and, through that, maximising the delivery of what is most important to local voters, would seem to be appropriate. We therefore recommend the council:

- Creates the opportunity for a cross-party budget development process
- Ensures all the political groups on the council are adequately supported by officers in being able to contribute constructively to the budget process and have the necessary insight and understanding to put forward proposals and take decisions that are fully informed

These concepts were touched upon during the peer team's time with the council and were widely welcomed across the senior leadership. It is extremely positive that the Mayor and political group leaders are committed to a cross-party approach, supported by officers, to determining the budget. Alternative budgets may nonetheless be proposed. Council officers must have the capacity to support all the political groups as necessary in formulating their budget thinking and, crucially, understanding the context and implications.

A council's Overview and Scrutiny function provides opportunity across the elected membership, including enhancing accountability of the Executive and helping to shape policy and secure improved outcomes for local people. There is a widely held view in the council that the Overview and Scrutiny Committees do not maximise their impact yet, despite the enthusiasm, interest and willingness demonstrated by the Chairs that we met. We recommend that the council moves the Overview and Scrutiny function and committees onto a more effective and strategic footing.

One aspect of this entails the Mayor and Cabinet members being invited to

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participate actively in more meetings – rather than observing them in person or online as they currently largely seem to (which demonstrates their interest and commitment). Another aspect is enabling Overview and Scrutiny to provide robust scrutiny of budget proposals during the budget-setting process (through input at appropriate junctures based on access to the necessary information) and budget spend through the year. There was widespread agreement amongst people we met that there should also be an increased emphasis within Overview and Scrutiny on 'forward looking' policy development, helping to inform decision-making and council approaches. The overall objective of the recommendation around Overview and Scrutiny is ensuring a focus on the most pertinent issues for Doncaster and the council and making a meaningful and positive impact upon them.

As a core theme running through everything outlined here so far, it is important for the council to ensure all the necessary training and development is put in place for elected members in ways that they find accessible – and that all councillors demonstrate the necessary commitment to undertaking it.

Training and development for elected members to enable them to fulfil those responsibilities is important in any council but even more so in a context of the May 2025 elections seeing 39 out of 56 councillors in Doncaster entering local government for the first time.

The provision of a weekly Member Training Bulletin to all councillors is very positive in providing the opportunity for them to be aware of what training and development is available. The participation of many elected members in training and development, covering over fifty topics in the 2025/26 training plan, shows that there is a willingness on the part of most to take up opportunities. The fact that a small number of councillors had not undertaken aspects of their mandatory training a year after the elections, despite such sessions being repeated at least three times, is much less positive.

There is learning to draw from the approach adopted to the induction of councillors last year. Whilst council officers sought to provide elected members with as comprehensive an introduction to the organisation and their roles as early on as they could, the feedback is that the intensity of it, reflected in three full days of induction

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very shortly after the elections, was too much. There was also feedback in relation to the delivery style of induction sessions, with a seemingly heavy emphasis on presentations containing significant levels of detail that some found 'overwhelming'.

There also appear to have been issues in relation to some councillors' level of awareness of what was available, with Reform UK councillors that we met indicating, as an example, that they had no awareness of an event providing the opportunity for elected members to meet officers from a range of council services and functions. This, despite it being communicated via e-mail and the Weekly Training Bulletin. As a specific, there was some interest indicated in this type of activity being re-run over the coming months.

The council indicates it is committed to re-visiting the induction activity and drawing out the related learning, including re-delivering core aspects of it now that elected members have had more time to 'find their feet'. This provides the opportunity to ensure issues of 'accessibility', including the format and style of delivery, are addressed.

A core aspect of training and development provision going forward should be mentoring for all those elected members new to leadership roles, including shadow portfolio holders. Some externally facilitated mentoring activity has been undertaken by people in the council over recent months and the informal feedback is that this has proved beneficial. There is scope to build upon this.

Benefits can also be accrued through senior councillors engaging in learning and networking beyond Doncaster, as some have been in recent months. Examples include participation in sub-regional, regional and national level forums for cohorts of Cabinet members from different councils holding the same or similar portfolios. Such activity has been organised within some political parties as well as by the LGA.

Whilst the council has a responsibility to provide councillors with training and development opportunities relating to their many and varied roles, there must be a greater willingness on the part of elected members in Doncaster to participate in training and development. Some councillors have been exemplary in their attendance and participation. Others, much less so.

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We heard that a number of new councillors were 'paper candidates' and not expecting to be elected. This is relevant context in understanding their initial experience and training needs. It cannot, however, provide an indefinite explanation for any shortcomings in the discharge of elected member responsibilities. Once elected, members have accepted the significant responsibilities of public office and there needs to be a move away from explaining why they may initially have been unprepared to ensuring that they are properly supported and held to the standards expected of elected members.

For any councillor feeling that what they are experiencing is not what they came into local government for, it is perhaps beneficial to recognise that the way of fulfilling their aspirations for their communities and being impactful is understanding how to operate through established council governance frameworks and mechanisms. Central to this is engagement in their communities, including the likes of undertaking ward surgeries, participating in Ward Network meetings and attending meetings of town and parish councils within 'the patch'. It also links to maximising participation in training and development and helping to fulfil the potential of Overview and Scrutiny. Support is readily available within the council for any councillor finding it difficult to navigate how to fulfil their role to greatest effect.

We gleaned frustration amongst some councillors we met with aspects of the council's Constitution. This seems to be a combination of:

- A lack of familiarity with, or understanding of, well-established and appropriate governance mechanisms
- Areas where the council's governance approaches and processes might benefit from refinement

The council's Constitution was last formally reviewed in 2011 but has been subject to change and revision regularly across the years since. In order to provide councillors with both insight and a way of positively channelling their thoughts and ideas, we recommend that the council establishes a cross-party Constitution reference group. This would operate in a similar way to the Ward Member Reference Group that pools experience, thinking, ideas and learning from across the elected membership

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regarding how the council and councillors operate at the ward level. It would be advisory in nature, with the proposals that emerge considered by Full Council.

The Monitoring Officer would play a key role in the Constitution reference group but we recommend that it is independently chaired. Additionally, whilst it would be cross-party in nature, it should not be subject to political proportionality rules – rather it should be open to all councillors keen to input or draw learning. The review of Council Procedure Rules agreed by Full Council in April this year should form part of the work of the group.

The council already has a Member/Officer Protocol in place. We recommend that work takes place to co-design a strengthened version of this. Officers that we met from beyond the senior managerial leadership had clear and positive ideas around this and would welcome the opportunity to input to its development. There should be a strong focus on behaviours – with these carrying through to the management and leadership development programme that the council is establishing. The protocol should support a clear distinction of respective roles and boundaries and promote mutual respect. Activity around this could form part of the work of the Constitution reference group, ahead of Full Council considering what is proposed.

The council's 'Councillor Online' facility supports elected members taking forward casework on behalf of residents. Amongst the councillors that we met, there was a positive view of this facility, with it funnelling members' enquiries to the relevant part of the organisation, monitoring levels of responsiveness and linking officers and councillors up when there are issues over which direct liaison is most appropriate. There is anecdotal evidence, though, that this isn't a universal view amongst councillors. Also, some officers that we met expressed some reservations about the system although this related less to the system itself and more to the volume of enquiries being received and not all councillors adhering to it.

We recommend that the council takes stock of the situation in relation to 'Councillor Online' in order to ensure that the approach to elected members' enquiries works for everybody and, as a key part of this, ensures a 'one route in' approach is upheld. This is important in avoiding the pressures and tensions that emerge, presumably inadvertently, from councillors approaching officers directly, whether by e-mail, phone

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or face to face.

The council's management structure sees the statutory roles of Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer reporting to the Executive Director of Corporate Resources. Given the importance of these roles to the good governance of the council and, as part of that, the postholders being 'fully in the loop' and integral to organisational decision-making, we recommend that the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer become standing members of the Executive Leadership Team (as the council's senior management forum). This does not amend the council's organisational structure.

One of the most contentious areas since the elections has been the divergence of views and understanding around which information was or should have been shared by officers with which elected members, at what points and through which channels. As the council's Position Statement outlines, this has been played out in 'disputes' around Constitutional interpretation, committee remit, Proper Officer functions, meeting requisitions, decision-making responsibilities, perceptions around conflicts of interest and the application of professional advice. This has seen significant challenge, including the council having to resort to sourcing external legal advice, including King's Counsel, to try and establish clarity.

Linked to what we touched on previously regarding defensive behaviours being demonstrated in the current climate, there is a risk that the above situation becomes more fraught and self-reinforcing as officers become more cautious about sharing information. This risk needs to be averted – an environment needs to be created in which information flows more readily and openly. Elected members can only make good, informed decisions on complex and contentious issues if they have been able to see all the relevant information, within the legal rules on access to information and confidentiality. The council needs to ensure it is confident and sound on the basis with which it is decided what is appropriate to share, when, how and who with. As a key aspect of this, we recommend that regular meetings take place between the Chief Executive and political group leaders both individually and collectively. This would build upon the monthly meetings that take place between the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Reform UK Group and the Chief Executive.

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The council engages with trade unions through a variety of forums. These include monthly Directorate-level Joint Consultative Committees; the monthly HR and Trade Union Convenor Group; and the Doncaster Consultative Group which meets annually. Whilst this is positive, we recommend that the council establishes more regular arrangements for the Mayor and Chief Executive to meet formally with trade unions in order to ensure the senior-most political and managerial leadership is more regularly directly sighted on key issues relating to the council's workforce.

Our final recommendation comes in a context of what we have outlined in this report only working if those involved are willing to engage constructively, are committed to moving forwards and recognise and fulfil their responsibilities. The message is that the process of improvement 'won't happen to you, it can only happen through you'. For those who can't make the necessary commitment, we would recommend that they consider their continuing role. As one individual the peer team met outlined, the requirement is for senior leaders to "work together, we're all in it for Doncaster".

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