

TOUR DE FORCE

Its peers say North Yorkshire County Council
is one of the best local authorities in the country
Find out why it's in the leading pack



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Playing to your strengths



‘The most important thing in my role is to create a stable platform for great people to come here and work effectively.’

Richard Flinton, chief executive of North Yorkshire County Council

North Yorkshire County Council has a reputation for running high quality services. Its children’s services are nationally recognised for their excellence and in many service areas it is taking a national lead to spread best practice.

But it wasn’t until the results of an independent Local Government Association (LGA) peer review were published earlier this year that it became clear just how good the council is as a whole.

The LGA said it was one of the most positive reports it had ever written.

Here’s a snapshot: ‘North Yorkshire County Council is a very good council – its services are highly regarded and the peer review team witnessed areas of excellence... [it] has a clear understanding of the challenges and the opportunities that the county council and the county face.’

It goes on to praise the strength of political and officer leadership, the loyal and committed workforce, the willingness to adapt, the maturing commercial approach and the council’s ‘focused, “can do” culture’ that strives for continuous improvement.’

The latter sums up the council’s mindset. When asked about his local authority’s success, leader Cllr Carl Les says he is proud of what’s been achieved but after a lifetime working in hospitality and retail he’s an advocate of the M&S mantra: ‘today’s excellent is tomorrow’s average.’

From children’s social care to highways, the county council has services that are regarded as among the best. All this while losing a third of its budget in the space of five years in England’s largest county where public services can be very expensive to deliver.

It’s an area of stark contrasts – from affluent market towns to remote villages to coastal communities with high levels of deprivation. That means catering for a diverse population and tackling issues that are intensified compared with other parts of the country, such as isolation

and an ageing demographic. It also means staff have to work across a huge geographical area – some towns are as much as three hours apart. Adding to that complexity, it’s a two-tier area with seven districts, a myriad of partnerships and no fewer than six clinical commissioning groups.

So what’s the secret of the council’s success?

When chief executive Richard Flinton took up his post six years ago, austerity was just kicking in. One thing he did not want to be was a CEO delivering salvation through a single heroic idea, the challenges required a more thought through approach.

‘We were determined to make sure we were ahead of the curve,’ he says. ‘Things were going at such a pace that being behind the curve was not the place to be.’

The One Council programme, which pulled together different aspects of the authority, was quickly established before being succeeded by the 2020 North Yorkshire programme back in 2013.

‘For our transformation programme, we wanted a strengths based approach running through the organisation. We did not want to be a so-called ‘commissioning council’ with large scale outsourcing. We have always been pragmatic with some involvement of the private sector to help deliver outcomes. But fundamentally we have a history of delivering strong services and we wanted to build on that, release our own talent and ingenuity as well as passion for the county. We set out a programme to fundamentally look at our services, the strength of our role, what our new role could be, the strengths of our communities.’

It can be difficult to get to the nub of why certain organisations are successful. But in North Yorkshire’s case one of the key ingredients is having a strong vision and the organisational strength to embed that in the workforce and communicate it to the communities they serve. Staff turnover is low and surveys show people are proud to work

North Yorkshire boasts two national parks, the Yorkshire coast, it hosted the hugely successful Tour de France in 2014, is one of the most sought after places to live in the UK and it’s home to the largest private sector investment in the north of England. Austin Macauley discovers how its innovative county council is building on these assets by remaining ahead of the game





NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL STAFF - WHAT THE PEER REVIEW SAID

'Staff are noticeably loyal, passionate and committed to delivering their best for NYCC through a strong public service ethos.'

'We were also struck by the positive pragmatism, adaptability and flexibility of officers, and their willingness to take on new responsibilities and roles.'

'Staff told us it was a very warm and friendly place to work, corporate directors all had a regular "open door" policy and walked the floor regularly to talk with staff informally.'

for the organisation. The council invests in its staff – whether it's in ICT to make working across a large rural county easier or creating better career development pathways, as seen in children's services.

It also empowers them to think commercially and will back new ideas that have a robust business case so that they are implemented quickly, accelerated by the council's in house trading hub SmartSolutions and an increasing number of companies (see pages 6-7).

The foundations for this flexibility – and ability to invest in key areas – are in what the LGA peer review team described as the council's 'tremendous grip' on its budget. It's made £116m of savings over the last five years and has remained a year ahead of target throughout.

'It's allowed us to have cash in hand from being underspent,' says Richard. 'That's been helpful to both finance more change and make sure we were seen to be investing in the key priorities for the public to make sure the public were on board.'

When you live in a county like North Yorkshire connectivity is vital, whether it's access to excellent road networks or superfast broadband. Prudent financial management and a more commercial approach have enabled the council to invest heavily in both. Richard believes that commitment has been crucial in ensuring the narrative is about prioritising and delivering improved services where you can and not just making cutbacks.

It has also helped it to open up dialogue with communities about their role and to bring a fresh focus around prevention. The vision is to boost people's life chances and health and wellbeing to create more resilient communities and in turn reduce demand on key services. That's why the council is investing in Stronger Communities, a universal prevention programme designed to build capacity among residents.

'We're being very clear with the public by saying, we're relying on you to step up to the plate. It will be a partnership. For example, we can still provide specialist library services but we want you to staff the libraries.' As a result, just one library has closed, 10 have switched to community ownership and a further 20 will soon follow.

When asked about the council's success, Richard says there aren't any 'magic tricks'. The advantage in North Yorkshire is there's an ethos among both staff and residents to "get stuck in", you need good plans but at the end of the day it's all about delivery.'

He adds: 'The most important thing in my role is that in times of stress and challenges I need to create a stable platform for great people to come here and work effectively. The thing I needed to do is make sure my senior managers feel comfortable to do different and difficult things and to feel supported.'

'Over the course of six years there have been changes to the senior leadership team but stability has been important. There's also now a sense of collective mission and a stronger bond between officers and members.'

And as with the leader's M&S mantra, all successful organisations have one eye permanently on the future.

'It's about having good people and even when you are a good organisation you have to question everything you are doing,' says Richard. 'The organisation is always changing, people will move on and retire so you have to keep renewing the organisation. We need to find the next group of talented officers who will move us on and add to what we are already doing. We want great people who will see North Yorkshire as a career destination where they can do cutting edge work.'

A nimble council in changing times



When I was younger I was a great believer in listening to the Kennedys. I think it was Bobby Kennedy who said, 'don't ask if change is coming, ask rather how you can influence it'. Change is inevitable and in local government we have to anticipate it and implement the best possible changes for the future. The pace of change has been accelerated because of austerity – but you have to look at it as an opportunity rather than a threat.

The key to success in North Yorkshire is that we're a very well led local authority. I'm not claiming credit! I have only been leader for a year while my predecessor was in post for 13 years. Political leadership has been good and stable and respectful to other party's opinions. That filters down into an excellent senior management team and cascades down into the rest of the workforce. We have a very good management regime.

But our success is also about the culture of the organisation.

We see commercialism as an exciting proposition. It's no coincidence that the majority of my cabinet either run their own business or like me have retired from running a business. Senior management have taken up that commercial mindset and made it part of the culture of the organisation. What's changed over the years is that some time ago if you gave somebody at the council a £100,000 budget, the measure of success was how close to budget you are. We now have a culture which says, 'do I really need £100,000 to achieve those outcomes?'

We do feel we're ahead of the game all the time as a result of this culture. It means we can reinvest in things that affect people's everyday lives in a large rural county like North Yorkshire, such as highways and superfast broadband.

That investment has helped us to have a full and frank discussion with local residents about their role in the future. Our Stronger Communities programme is basically shorthand for helping communities to help themselves. It's nothing new. I was brought up in a North Yorkshire village and it ran on volunteers.

We have just upped the ante on that by saying in a very honest way to communities: these are things we just can't do anymore. By playing their part, we will get better outcomes in the long run.

CLLr Carl Les, leader of the council



Investing in the future

North Yorkshire is now regarded as a hotbed of innovation and excellence in children's services



When we interview people we test their approach and attitude, it's not just about qualifications. We want to do, will do people. When you have a team full of staff like that – and give them the support and stability they need – you get exceptional outcomes for young people.'

In just those few words, Judith Hay, assistant director for children and families, sums up a key factor in what has been an incredible journey at North Yorkshire County Council over the last seven years. From having its safeguarding rated adequate by Ofsted in 2009, children's services are now among the top 10 in the country.

An LGA peer review highlighted it as an area of excellence, describing the council's children's services as a 'beacon' for other authorities thanks to 'genuinely inspiring' outcomes.

And on a separate visit to see the council in action, DCLG director general Louise Casey was moved to say: 'You and your colleagues were completely inspirational.

I felt uplifted and completely reinvigorated by the time I got home.'

No wonder then that the county council is one of just eight local authorities selected by the Department for Education (DfE) as Partners in Practice to share best practice across the sector.

Different parts of children's services have been merged and streamlined to allow for the creation of a single front door referral system which all agencies and schools refer through. A new 0-19 multi-agency prevention service, which works alongside the healthy child teams, is delivering targeted and earlier engagement of families. It has led to a 25% reduction in social care referrals with 98% of these progressing to assessment – an increase of almost 25% – and has so far saved the council £3m.

To get a flavour of the glowing terms North Yorkshire's provision is attracting, read the latest Ofsted report on one of its children's homes – Stepney Road in Scarborough. Rating the centre 'outstanding', it says 'young people make exceptional progress taking into

account their starting points.' It goes on to praise 'the abundant pride staff take in working with young people,' the tailored and evidence based 'solution-focused approaches,' the way young people are empowered and given access to a variety of expert support, and the strong multi-agency working.

No Wrong Door

Stepney Road is at the heart of No Wrong Door, the council's groundbreaking scheme to support troubled and challenging young people who have been in and out of foster care.

It was the first council programme to attract more than £2m from the DfE's Innovations Programme, money that was matched by over £4m from the authority's funds for looked after children in a move designed to radically overhaul its approach and up the ante on prevention.

Traditional care homes have made way for two multi-agency hubs, in Scarborough and Harrogate, which aim to steer vulnerable young people away from offending

Leading school improvement

Nine out of every 10 schools in North Yorkshire are rated good or outstanding and the county has been in the nation's top 20% for a number of years at Key Stage 4. With the Government recently unveiling plans for schools to lead their own improvement, the local authority has put the foundations in place for strong sector-led improvement.

It has set up four school improvement partnerships (IPs), led by headteachers, for early years, secondary, primary and special schools. They all commission work to tackle key issues, for example, the secondary IP is enabling high performing schools to work with those that have had two successive Ofsted reports indicating they require improvement. Another workstream has paid for an extra post in the council's HR team to work with schools to help them recruit teachers – a significant problem in a large rural county.

The council is also leading and supporting some key cutting-edge initiatives that, with partners, are making a



difference to the education offer in the county.

The coastal district of Scarborough has schools with particular challenges and through the Scarborough Pledge, £250,000 a year is being invested in areas including early help, raising aspirations and improving schools.

The Pledge is also facilitating better links between

the education community and employers, for example Scarborough Engineering Week works with more than 2,000 students every year.

Through Achievement Unlocked – a collaborative partnership between the council, schools and the National Education Trust – the educational attainment gap caused by inequality is being tackled. Some 45 schools are taking part and are being offered a programme of professional development and collaborative working to raise the achievements of disadvantaged pupils.

Careers guidance in schools in the county and York is being improved via a two-year project in partnership with the University of Derby and funded by the council and the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Local Enterprise Partnership.

There is now a real sense of a North Yorkshire education community committed to liberating the potential of all rather than life chances being determined by geography or family circumstances.

and substance misuse, bring stability to their lives and re-engage them with education.

Each team includes specialist support such as a life coach who is a clinical psychologist and a speech and a communications therapist. As well as providing residential and emergency accommodation on site, the hubs work hard to find the right setting for each person, whether with foster families or supported lodgings.

The result is much greater support for foster families as well as the young people themselves. Combined with other developments, No Wrong Door is expected to reduce the county's looked after population to 400 – it has already dropped by 20% in the space of 18 months.

No Wrong Door is now seen as a national exemplar. In his Government-commissioned report, Residential Care in England, Sir Martin Narey described it as a 'hugely ambitious... clever and sophisticated programme' and called on others to follow its example: 'It dismantles the binary divide between fostering and residential care to offer the best of both.'

Pete Dwyer, corporate director for children and



young people's services, says the approach is now being looked at by up to 40 local authorities. It's indicative of the sector's high regard for North Yorkshire's children's services.

The county has reduced child protection plans by 25% and increased children worked with by the new prevention service by 40%. Successes like this are partly down to 'a very forensic approach to social care' which

ensures the council knows its services 'inside out', says Pete. But they're also about having a highly motivated and stable workforce.

'Families were telling us they were having too many changes in social worker. That's one of the reasons we took the decision not to have any agency staff. I think it brings instability in terms of the families and the team and it leads to overspend.'

From having one in four of social workers from agencies in 2010, it currently has none. The emphasis now is on workforce development, including a salary sacrifice scheme to enable unqualified staff to train to become social workers and investment in the skills of team managers.

'I have been in social work for 35 years and culturally this is the most pleasant place I've worked,' says Judith. 'There's a real culture of collaboration and strong support from the leadership. I don't think a lot of people in the council know how good we are. And unlike many local authorities, you don't have to constantly feed the machine in terms of reports.'



Building resilience in later life

This approach is driving a wider change to the whole adult social care service: as well as prevention, practice is being strengthened, specialist services are being put into the council's customer centre and reablement and planned care services are being developed further.

Taking extra care to new levels

Prevention is also seen in the council's flagship commitment to developing extra care housing, not only as a place for people to live but also as a vital part of community regeneration. Human-scale schemes have been built in 21 locations over the past decade and more are in the pipeline, underpinned by a £9m capital investment programme. The council is now working with NHS partners to pilot a model for extra care providing intermediate care services, as an alternative to hospital admission.

Extra care and the prevention programmes – and current investment in social care mental health services – are testament to the fact that the council, even during austerity, is prepared to put taxpayers' money into planning ahead for the future.

Everywhere you look, there's innovation: new models of care with multidisciplinary teams bringing health and social care practitioners together around GP practices in Harrogate; strengthened teams of social workers and occupational therapists working together on new reablement services; work with the NHS to develop new models of delivering integrated community services.

These changes are aimed at helping more people, at whatever age, live longer, healthier, independent lives. Inevitably though, there remains a big focus on the county's older people. 'There are challenges in having an ageing, potentially more frail population – but older people are the glue in most communities,' says Richard. 'They provide the care for younger family members, they are the ones that keep communities going. People are quite self-reliant here and we are building on that strength.'

In many respects North Yorkshire is a window to the future for health and adult social care. Demand for services and demographic trends in the county are where the rest of the country will be in 2020. As Richard Webb, corporate director for health and adult services, wrote recently in *The MJ*: 'Our challenges today are your challenges tomorrow.'

As a result, it has had to stay ahead of the curve. Nationally there has been a stronger focus on prevention and a push for greater integration between health and social care. These are agendas that are already well developed in North Yorkshire.

A third of the population will be over 65 by 2037 and the majority of older people in this extensive county already live in the most rural areas, which can be remote and bring risks such as isolation and loneliness.

'We're working at a community level to help people live well: make sure they have all the information and advice they need to be self-reliant and reduce isolation and loneliness by helping communities to support each other,' says Richard.

The transfer of public health into the council has helped a major shift towards prevention. As well as innovative approaches to tackling obesity in children and adults and rural outreach services, the shift has centred on two programmes: universal prevention through Stronger Communities; and targeted prevention via Living Well. The former provides

With an ageing population and demand for care services five years ahead of the rest of the country, the focus in North Yorkshire is on helping communities to help themselves

start-up support and funding for local initiatives, including community ownership of libraries, car share clubs and 'Men in Shed' schemes to support better health and wellbeing among older men.

'It's about going with the grain of communities,' says Richard.

Living Well, funded by public health grant and by Scarborough and Ryedale Clinical Commissioning Group, is targeted at people who are on the cusp of care. Its 12-week programmes are about increasing confidence and resilience and delaying the need for care using one to one support from a co-ordinator.

Trading on your assets

Commercial thinking now runs to the heart of North Yorkshire County Council as it gears up for self-sufficiency

Like many local authorities, North Yorkshire County Council is facing the prospect of life without revenue support grant before the end of this decade.

Aside from making savings and boosting business rates, councils will need to adopt a far more commercial mindset than in the past. That culture change has been accelerated in North Yorkshire through the creation of a new vehicle – SmartSolutions – that’s not only opened up new income streams but also helped it to deliver better services in the process.

So confident is the council that it will succeed, it has outlined plans in its 2020 change programme to use commercial activities to plug the £14m savings gap in its medium term financial strategy.

SmartSolutions is essentially playing to the county council’s strengths. As a recent LGA peer review

highlighted, the local authority has ‘a strong service delivery brand’ and that opens the door to many commercial opportunities. In short, it has excellent services and expertise that others will want to buy.

The council has traded services for a number of years. What SmartSolutions has done is create a dedicated team to package, market and sell those services. By recruiting staff from sales and marketing backgrounds, the council can present to the market what it knows are great services in a sophisticated and business savvy way.

SmartSolutions already has an annual turnover of £50m. Services to schools make up the bulk of the business but it is increasingly trading on its strengths around areas such as early years, safeguarding and other aspects of social care.

‘The key to maximising the council’s potential’,

says Gary Fielding, corporate director of strategic resources, ‘will be to ensure that commercial message is engrained across the organisation. That’s why a commercial development programme has been set up to bring about that all-important change in culture’.

‘We have great assets that are very marketable,’ he explains. ‘We encourage all parts of the council to think creatively and take risks. It’s about realising the assets you have can create an income. SmartSolutions is a hub right at the heart of the organisation where we have people to deal with sales, marketing, building business cases and taking products to market.’

‘It’s very much a cultural change and we are well advanced on that journey. The phrase I used to use too often is things take too long to do around here – that’s why we aim to move from idea to delivery in 30 days. It’s a really healthy dynamic. If it’s a good idea we say to people, SmartSolutions can help you to deliver it quickly.’

Sometimes being a commercially minded council requires lateral thinking – as with NYnet, a company set up by the council in 2007 having originally been formed as Adit Yorkshire and Humber, the Government vehicle for aggregating broadband procurement in the public sector. It now delivers superfast broadband across the whole county and has increased access from 80% to 91% and is investing £21m to reach 95% coverage by 2019.

Given broadband is an essential utility, particularly in a vast rural county with thousands of micro businesses, it’s a win-win for the council by not only tackling issues like isolation but also paying back in terms of local economic growth.

Similarly, a Teckal company co-owned by North Yorkshire and York councils, called Yorwaste, will enable the local authorities to access cheap waste disposal and create an income stream. The councils’ deal with Amey over the development of Allerton Waste Recovery Plant, due to open in 2018, will provide excess capacity which they will then trade through Yorwaste.

All of which is helping to embed the business message.

‘There’s now a wider understanding that a commercial approach is a good thing to bring in,’ says Gary. ‘It allows us to reinvest in services and keep council tax down – it can be a virtuous circle.’

And it indirectly provides an additional way to ensure the council maintains and improves the quality of its own services: ‘If what we provide isn’t good enough then people won’t buy it.’



One of the key challenges in any two-tier area is to ensure county and district councils work together effectively.

Given the scale of the task facing local government in times of austerity, North Yorkshire has sought to work much closer with its seven districts to help boost capacity and nurture better ways of working.

For example, the county council shares office space with Craven and Ryedale district councils and provides telecommunications, IT and HR services to a number of districts.

At the forefront of this work is Better Together, a collaboration with Selby District Council. A joint post has been created with Selby’s chief executive also working as an assistant chief executive for the county council.

Services are being redesigned to make them more efficient and effective and many staff have been co-located. The focus is on making better use of assets to improve services and deliver savings and the programme was praised by an LGA peer review.

Solicitor Kelly Hamblin was seconded to the county council’s legal team via Better Together in 2015 and now works there for three days and spends two days at Selby.

‘I have met new people, shared experiences with colleagues in similar roles at the county council, and seen how the county council works and how their challenges coincide or differ from a rural district council,’ she says. ‘The shared legal system means I can work for both the councils efficiently and seamlessly, as we share a filing and telephone system.’



Keeping the economy on track

Councils have a key role to play in stimulating economic growth and in a two-tier area such as North Yorkshire strong partnerships are vital to delivering real results.

Transport is a great example, whereby North Yorkshire County Council is on the board of Transport for the North and leading the way in ensuring the Northern Powerhouse recognises the importance of major cities and their rural neighbours working together to maximise growth.

This is already reaping results, whereby the strategic transport plan and partnership working with both districts and the local enterprise partnership (LEP) has delivered major rail service improvements, including doubling of services between York and Scarborough and Harrogate and Leeds, negotiated through the rail franchises.

Alongside this strategic leadership, the council's highways department is among the most highly regarded in the country – all the more impressive given it has 9,000km of roads to maintain and close to 2,000 bridges.

One of the keys to the department's increasing effectiveness is investment in a highways management information system that allows highways officers to inspect, record and order works remotely.

The council's £65m programme of 481 road maintenance schemes, which is ahead of schedule, has been boosted by the LEP's Local Growth Fund allocation to the tune of £24m. This reflects the role of market towns as a hub for rural areas and the boost to the county's 30,000 micro businesses from well-maintained roads.

Investment in planned highways maintenance has led to one of the lowest reactive maintenance expenditures at 8.7% of budget compared with a national average of 22%.

David Bowe, corporate director business and environmental services, says the same commercial mindset is informing the way services are run across the board.

The county council has the highest performing trading standards service in the country, it leads on tackling doorstep crime and jointly runs the National Trading Standards e-Crime team. The service takes pride in helping businesses, proactively working with them to ensure they do things properly and are able to deliver growth and jobs across the county.

The natural assets of North Yorkshire are delivering some internationally significant opportunities, for example a potash mine in the North York Moors National Park – the largest private sector investment in the Northern Powerhouse – is worth £1bn to the local



Investment where it matters most is ensuring North Yorkshire's vast and diverse landscape remains an economic asset, not a threat

economy. Also, North Yorkshire County Council played a leading role in delivering the Tour de France to Yorkshire and is now supporting the Tour de Yorkshire, which is attracting thousands of new visitors to the county.

But of course, not everything goes to plan, as was demonstrated by the horrendous floods of Christmas 2015 when the collapse of Tadcaster Bridge made national headlines. Working closely with the local community and emergency services, the council was able to deliver a temporary solution while securing funding to fully repair and reinstate the bridge. The council went even further,

lending the LEP £2.5m to accelerate investment in flood defences, safeguarding hundreds of jobs. It's an example of how strong relationships and a risk based approach are delivering impact locally.

Capitalising on its partnership approach and working closely with both district councils and the LEP, the region is benefiting from a strong growing economy while its Local Growth Deal has enabled major investment in infrastructure, supporting a 70% increase in house building.

With a world class agricultural base, North Yorkshire has secured two national agri-tech centres of excellence at FERA Science in Ryedale. Innovation in the region is tackling some of the biggest global issues such as food and energy security, placing the county at the heart of the UK's industrial strategy.

James Farrar, chief operating officer of York, North Yorkshire and East Riding LEP, believes the council stands out from its peers elsewhere.

'The council has allowed the private sector to lead and looks at where it can add value. We have been able to make commercially focused investments, delivering value and returns for public monies, whilst delivering much needed houses and jobs across our area. The maturity of the relationship between the county council and LEP really stands out compared with other areas.'



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If all the roads in North Yorkshire were laid end-to-end they would get to Rio de Janeiro



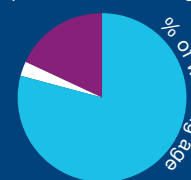
16.6%
of the North Yorkshire
Workforce are
self-employed



10.2%
is the national
average

601k population

362k work age



● **79.2%** working | **74.4%** Eng
● **18.6%** inactive | **13.7%** Eng
● **2.8%** unemployed | **5%** Eng



Health

People in North Yorkshire are generally healthy. Life expectancy for men and woman is higher than the England average

Economy



89.4% of businesses in the County are micro businesses, **employing fewer than 10 people**



Agriculture & accommodation and food services are the two main specialist industrial sectors.



Employment in **defence and public administration** is higher than the national average

County

England's
Largest
County

601,500
Population

3,103²
Miles

- 2 National Parks
- East Coast Mainline
- A1(M)

¹The headline employment and inactivity rates are based on the population aged 16 to 64 but the headline unemployment rate is based on the economically active population aged 16 and over.
²Of the 18.6% of inactive working age people, 17.4% are in early retirement compare to 13.7% for England.