

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

South Cambridgeshire District Council

12 September 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 31st October – 3rd November 2023 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately ten months after the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the early progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's RAG rated CPC Action Plan.
- Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs.
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank South Cambridgeshire District Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at South Cambridgeshire District Council took place onsite on 12th September 2024.

The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

- **Finance**, (incorporating recommendation 2.3, a, b and c)
- **Business Plan**, (incorporating recommendations 2.1, 2.2, 2.6 and 2.9)
- **Governance**, (incorporating recommendations 2.4, 2.5 and 2.12)
- **Transformation**, (incorporating recommendations 2.7, 2.8, 2.10 and 2.11)

For this Progress Review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Lead Officer Peer: Sarah King, Deputy Chief Executive & CFO, Eastleigh Borough Council
- Lead Member Peer: Cllr Joe Harris, Leader, Cotswold District Council
- Member Peer: Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader, Breckland District Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager: James Mehmed, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's twelve recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action plan reports that 10 actions are completed / are progressed and 2 are in the process of being progressed following a short delay for objective business reasons.

The council shared with peers how the corporate peer challenge process has enabled the organisation to reflect and further consider the advice and feedback from peers.

The following four themes incorporate each of the peer team's twelve recommendations and summarise the progress and current impact.

Finance

Recommendation 2.3, a, b and c

Peers met with representatives from finance, including the Head of Finance, Chief Accountant and a Senior Finance Business Partner; colleagues reflected positively how receiving an external perspective through the peer challenge was critical alongside the related peer recommendations.

The council have made positive progress with publishing the draft accounts for years 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 which can be reviewed on the council's [website](#). The 2023/24 draft accounts were published in June 2024 and approved by the Audit Committee on 16 July 2024. The Audit Committee is well chaired and there are plans in place to implement a new independent member to the committee, in line with best

practice. A new external audit partner has been engaged and will start the process of auditing for the 2023/24 accounts in November 2024.

The impact of completing all the outstanding years of accounts has supported the finance function to focus on the new external audit arrangements with KPMG, as the team work hard to prepare all the information and working papers. So far, most of the 83 requests have been fulfilled with a smaller number remaining in preparation for auditing of the 2023/24 accounts in November 2024.

Peers heard how processing the backlog of outstanding accounts, and being fully resourced has supported an effective implementation of a new finance business partnering model, as well as raising morale. New working arrangements have enabled closer working relationships with the service areas to be established, resulting in a deeper understanding of the business leading to more local improvements and identification of efficiencies. Business partners spend some of their time located in nominated service area desk space, aiding informal communication, as well as regularly attending service area operational meetings.

The implementation of the business partnering model has been supported by a range of learning and development, covering subjects such as influencing and presentation skills. The finance team has good effective leadership with a much clearer direction of travel. The team themselves identify they are on a journey with further work to embed new ways of working. Early indications are positive, and a new programme is supporting the transition of financial accountability from the finance team to individual service managers, who will be fully responsible for their own budgets once all the tools and processes are in place.

There is still outstanding work to deliver on regular financial monitoring. The finance team have a plan to work towards service managers being accountable for all operational financial decision-making with full ownership for any over and underspending. Without the accountancy forecasting module of the 'Tech1' accountancy system, the council have implemented a process to escalate the reporting of any forecast shortfalls to the Leadership Team via the relevant Head of Service as a standing item of the fortnightly meeting. Peers were updated on the implementation of the forecasting model and plans for a phase of implementation

testing which will be aided by the recent appointment of a dedicated systems lead.

The council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was last approved in February 2024. The latest version will be presented to Cabinet in late September 2024. To address future budget gaps the council ran a series of 'Star Chambers' led by the Chief Executive and Chief Accountant with Heads of Service and Service Managers from each service area. Peers heard how the process has generated some immediate and longer-term ideas. No income or savings will be agreed without a full appraisal; whilst the identified income and saving numbers still need to be confirmed; the outcome of the 'Star Chambers' process has provisionally identified £1.5m contributing to the overall MTFS budget gap, which currently stands at £3m over a five-year period.

The council are now preparing for the budget setting process and are using the data team to help model future outcomes, such as potential growth on business rates and council tax income.

The council's fraud team is also raising the awareness of fraud through a drop-in session. The team have seen recent success through a targeted single person's discount fraud initiative, although ongoing, this has proved very successful in recovering funds where fraud or an inappropriate application of the discount has occurred. The Audit Committee have considered the updated fraud strategy which focuses more on prevention and data sharing, with ongoing discussion with Government to get data sharing arrangements in place. Members have received training on fraud awareness and are a key stakeholder in the fight against fraud.

Business Plan

Recommendations 2.1, 2.2, 2.6 and 2.9

The council have reflected on the peer feedback and related recommendations and found the subsequent internal conversations useful in setting the direction and next steps for both the Business Plan and Corporate Plan. Peers heard how the Corporate Plan had previously been quite internally focussed; there is now a much stronger drive to ensure the plan leans towards a more external facing audience.

The council are developing a new Corporate Plan for 2025-30, outlining the vision, priorities, and long-term goals for South Cambridgeshire. This will be supported by an annual 'Corporate Action Plan' (Business Plan) detailing yearly activities and outputs. The Leadership Team and Cabinet have been consulted on the proposed approach and priorities during July 2024 and plan to obtain feedback from the public and stakeholders to ascertain what people value and want from South Cambridgeshire and surrounding areas. The consultation will run for a period of six-weeks ending towards the end of October 2024. Recent upskilling in consultation practices will support the process of achieving a broad response, where council officers will be maximising existing and new networks, whilst growing contacts in the business sector. The council's business team have proactively visited the business community and discuss matters that are impacting the sector and now have 100 surveys completed that feed into the consultation process. The draft Corporate Plan and Action Plan will be submitted to Council for approval in February 2025.

The council is seeking to strengthen their outcome focused approach to ensure performance measures provide members and officers with data and information to manage operational performance and achievement of strategic / corporate objectives. Following the corporate peer challenge an investment has been made in a new data team with an offer already made to a senior role and in October the remaining role will be appointed to. The council is working with members to refresh and align the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) framework to ensure there are measures in place that support service performance to be robustly managed and given oversight by members as well as KPI's that measure the outcomes from strategic objectives. Peers heard how a member workshop is being scheduled for October / November 2024 to engage and coproduce a refreshed KPI framework, exploring feedback on what needs to change and how to provide members with a revised set of measures that allow members to hold the council to account over delivery. The LGA can provide member peers to support this session, providing external challenge and shared learning.

There is a strong ambition to ensure the council is challenging itself on performance, providing strong evidence that is outcome focused and also subject to benchmarking comparing performance to others ensuring there is an external comparison. The

council also recognise the role of scrutiny in performing deeper dives on different aspects of performance.

The council shared with peers a refreshed approach to target setting. The targets set will be dependent on the currently evaluated performance of the activity or service combined with its impact on corporate priorities. The council will implement a model based upon the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) model for functional standards referred to as the 'good, better, best model' to set performance levels and not accept anything set at a level less than 'good'. The council's Continuous Improvement Strategy 2024/25 provides further detail on performance management and target setting.

Communications have improved to parishes following engagement with parish clerks. Feedback has resulted in a new format newsletter. Parish clerks are engaging in future subject areas to direct the type of support offered.

The council shared with peers how 'Greater Cambridge Shared Planning' hosted an event titled 'Unlocking the Potential of Your Parish,' aimed at equipping Parish Clerks with the tools, knowledge, and resources needed to navigate planning processes and effectively support their communities. In addition, two planning workshops have been conducted, with two more sessions scheduled. An informal reference group has also been established for parishes along the proposed East West Rail route, to ensure their concerns are identified and incorporated into the planning consultation process.

Governance

Recommendations 2.4, 2.5 and 2.12

The council has taken actions to improve the robustness of data and information provided to members to support effective decision-making. Those actions have included the investment of a new Data and Intelligence Manager and a Data and Intelligence Officer with the remit to produce high quality data that can be used for policy making, engagement with residents and as part of the evidence and data provided to members in formal council reports.

The provision of data and evidence will improve the robustness of member reports,

alongside specific training that was delivered at Corporate Management Team (CMT) during January 2024. The training was delivered to improve the quality of reports with a focus on data and information, ensuring there is an understanding of who needs to be consulted as part of the provision of evidence. There is a drive to ensure all report recommendations are evidence driven and conclusions in reports reference the supporting evidence which should be available to members making the decision.

The Chief Executive is providing leadership to the organisation on the importance of producing high quality, evidence / data driven member reports. In terms of process, all reports will be sent to the Leadership Team, unless there is a rationale or alternative reason. All reports going to Cabinet will be seen by the Democratic Services Team Leader. Reports will go to different parts of the organisation. To ensure they meet the standards set by the Chief Executive, they will always be reviewed by a Corporate Manager before being formally sent to Cabinet.

The Monitoring Officer shared with peers how colleagues will ask for advice and guidance when preparing reports; this includes some longer-serving experienced colleagues, demonstrating the council has a supportive culture and openness to learn.

Colleagues met by peers reflect that the quality of reports has improved, although recognise there is always scope for improvement. The improvement in report writing will be monitored with colleagues reminded to continue to embed their practice.

The council have made progress with drafting a member development plan, although further work is required to complete this. The timing of the General Election impacted the progress of this action; however, the Elections and Democratic Services Manager confirmed a draft member development strategy (and plan) will be shared with the Chief Executive and members in October 2024. The strategy has been informed through engagement with members and colleagues; members are actively identifying their development needs with officers feeding into the process.

Peers were pleased to hear the council has looked externally at other councils' approach to member development, alongside evaluating online resources available from the LGA.

Further shaping of the strategy will take place over the next month to ensure it

addresses areas for improvement, for example increasing rates of attendance, members further owning their development and ensuring member development delivers value and impact.

Peers met with the Chair of Scrutiny to understand how the practice of scrutiny is being further improved to ensure effective assurance to the council.

Significant work to review the effectiveness of scrutiny had taken place in 2020, including an external review facilitated by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS). Although the council reflect good progress has been made on the outcomes of the review, there is a continued effort to ensure the scrutiny process remains effective and impactful.

Peers were informed that triangulation meetings regularly take place with the Chief Executive, Leader, Chair and Vice Chair. The Chair of Scrutiny was clear that scrutiny must add value, hence there is concerted effort to ensure items that are considered for scrutiny are appropriate. The triangulation meetings are used to discuss the forward plan, taking a longer-term view on future policy development, forecasting areas for scrutiny. There are many areas that could be added to the scrutiny agenda, however there is a discipline by the Committee Chair to only bring two or three items to scrutiny to ensure the quality of discussion and challenge is robust and meaningful. The Chair recognises it is more challenging to deep dive into a council area if there are more than two to three key areas to scrutinise.

Pre-scrutiny meetings are supported by Democratic Services to support members of the committee. Where possible these are kept brief and focused on ensuring all committee members are fully prepared for the lines of enquiry, developing targeted questions.

The scrutiny process is inclusive of pre-meetings to ensure lines of enquiry and questioning are considered in advance, ensuring there is robust challenge to policy development. Task and finish groups are used effectively where targeted work requires more capacity and focus. An example was shared with peers regarding a deep dive in youth engagement, where different services areas across the council were engaged. The Chair of Scrutiny values the role of task and finish groups and will recommend their use where value can be added in future areas for more

intensive scrutiny.

Peers reflect that there is good leadership and Chairing of the Scrutiny Committee, with support provided through senior officer leadership, democratic services and relationship with the Monitoring Officer.

The LGA can support scrutiny improvement through the [Leadership Essentials, Effective Scrutiny](#) two-day programme.

Transformation

Recommendations 2.7, 2.8, 2.10 and 2.11

Since the Corporate Peer Challenge, the council has made considerable progress with implementing an organisational development and people strategy. Peers discussed with colleagues how a new set of values was launched across the organisation in February 2024. The council recognise the values will need embedding and the People and HR Services Manager is working with the service leaders and Leadership Team to take all opportunities to reinforce the importance of the organisational values. The values are already driving new behaviours; an example was shared with peers where two teams were in disagreement over the action that should be taken to respond to a resident query. One of the team simply challenged the collective team by asking ‘What would be the most compassionate response for the customer?’. This approach led to a positive decision and outcome for the customer, practically demonstrating how values can shape organisational culture and performance. The new values are – Compassionate, Ambitious, Accountable and Collaborative.

The values are now actively being used to recruit colleagues with values-based evidence being captured and an integral part of selecting candidates.

The council successfully adopted the [People Strategy](#), which is inclusive of organisational development in July 2024, and implementing the range of strategic actions is work-in-progress. Peers heard how the People Strategy has a five-year delivery plan and will be supported by a range of targets and actions integrated with each service area work plan.

Similar to the recent implementation of the finance business partnering model, HR has also employed a business partnering model to support service areas with implementing the plan and supporting people and organisational development transformation.

Peers were impressed with the innovative approaches to people development and engagement, for example the use of QR codes for staff to access online forms to facilitate capturing employee feedback. The council is also implementing an online skills hub for short skills sessions, as well as maximising apprenticeship programmes and implementing a programme of coaching and mentoring.

The council have developed a communications programme around transformation which ensures there are regular updates being made across the council. The Head of Transformation, People and Corporate Services shared how all opportunities are exploited to regularly discuss the role of transformation and to engage colleagues within the process. Previously the transformation teams were clear on the remit of transformation, this has now expanded to colleagues across the organisation. There is also now increased communication and engagement before a service review commences.

During the peer challenge, peers shared their feedback on the transformation governance process recommending member oversight, as members were not involved in key decisions in transformation. Progress has been made following a review of the governance structure which now includes two Cabinet members on the strategic governance board, providing the opportunity to ensure member involvement on decision-making.

To increase more organisational ownership for transformation, the council have introduced the requirement for all managers to have a goal on delivering the target operating model (TOM) and delivering bankable savings as part of the annual performance management arrangements; the council recognise further embedding is required to implement this new arrangement.

Peers recommended the council's ICT provision was reviewed to ensure service provision was able to support current and future transformation requirements; this is critical given the dependency on ICT to support the TOM and transformation that will

deliver efficiencies and financial savings. An interim report was completed in July 2024 and agreement between the three councils has been achieved. The outcome is confidential and will be reported to Cabinet on 24 September 2024. The council are confident the outcome will support transformation programme delivery. Recent investment has been made in new developers specifically for the council to speed up delivery. The digital transformation team had a 12-month backlog to deliver digital solutions, this has been improved to 8-months and continues to reduce. Separate to the ICT provision, the council has its own AI club (Artificial Intelligence). The club was set up recently for anyone to participate in if interested in technology and to discuss new software, role of AI and encouraging colleagues to try new things. The club is a catalyst for helping colleagues to think differently about the application of technology.

Peers recommended undertaking the LGA 3-day communications review to support improved communications. The review has been commissioned and will take place during October 2024, with the outcomes driving a communications improvement plan.


The LGA can support the council with a range of transformation support, for example peer mentoring, shared learning / round table events and benchmarking. More detail can be found on the [LGA website](#), or can be discussed with your Regional Team.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank South Cambridgeshire District Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.



Rachel Litherland (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is Rachel.Litherland@local.gov.uk