

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Borough Council of King's Lynn and
West Norfolk

26th and 27th June 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge

Contents

- 1. Introduction 3
- 2. Summary of the approach..... 3
- 3. Progress Review - Feedback 5
- 4. Final thoughts and next steps 13
- 5. Appendix A..... 14

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in October 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 the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk (BCKLWN) 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 BCKLWN took place onsite on 26th and 27th June 2024.

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

Communication and engagement

- Recommendation 1 - Engage, consult and co-produce with residents and communities – Develop a customer engagement strategy/charter.
- Recommendation 2 - Talk and listen to staff, create new regular channels of ongoing staff engagement.

Strategic leadership and management

- Recommendation 3 - The political and managerial leadership needs to take stock and think about how to make the council fit for the future.
- Recommendation 4 - Re-focus SLT on strategic issues and empower managers to manage and deliver.

Finance

- Recommendation 5 - Use headroom to deliver ongoing annual revenue savings to address the underlying budget gap in 2026/27.

Transformation and performance measurement

- Recommendation 6 - Put in place a transformation programme that designs everything around residents and communities.
- Recommendation 7 - Performance measures and data need to focus on priorities and outcomes and provide the right information for members to make decisions.

Governance

- Recommendation 8 - Undertake a governance review to focus meetings on adding value to decision-making and scrutiny.

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

- Member Peer – Independent – Cllr Gillian Ford - London Borough of Havering
- Member Peer – Conservative – Peter Fleming – Former leader Sevenoaks District Council
- Chief Executive Peer - Rose Rouse, CEX Pendle Borough Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Kirsty Human

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's eight recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action plan reports that 15 per cent of actions are completed, 75 per cent are making expected progress and 10 per cent have not yet been progressed, in part due to impending changes to the senior management team and other key officer appointments.

It was clear to peers on their revisit that significant progress has been made since the peer team provided their insight and recommendations; the council is now in a very different place. Despite the changes in political leadership and the retirement of some senior officers, staff understand the council is evolving and embarking on a period of organisational change and are optimistic about the future and want to be involved. Appendix A shows a summary of how staff feel at the current time. Through a programme of targeted communications and engagement with staff the chief executive has given them a voice, created excitement and engaged the workforce for future transformation as the officer and political change transitions.

Communication and engagement

Recommendation 1 - Engage, consult and co-produce with residents and communities – Develop a customer engagement strategy/charter.

Recommendation 2 - Talk and listen to staff, create new regular channels of ongoing staff engagement.

Following the corporate peer challenge in October 2023, the council undertook a review of its communications function. The review has informed a new focus for the team and a redesigned role for the vacant manager post. A new communications and engagement manager is due to start at the end of summer 2024 with a refreshed remit of providing specialist advice and support to the council on developing plans and strategies which puts the voice of the customer and communities at the heart of service delivery.

There are clearly high expectations of what the new manager can deliver, but peers recognised some really good work already taking place with communities, including:

- Engagement with communities on long-term plan for towns.
- Application and adoption of the [Marmot principles](#) across the council.

- Visible front line officers interacting with residents on a daily basis, for example, parks and open spaces, recreation and leisure [Lily](#), and [Careline](#).

Bringing all this good work together, learning from the success of current projects and frontline services, the council has initiated a plan which the new communications and engagement manager can further develop into a strategy for the council.

It is essential the strategy is widely communicated internally and embedded across all services. Peers heard from a number of community officers that few officers from other services volunteer to support and take part in community events/fayres and drop-in sessions. All staff across the council need to recognise that customer and community engagement is integral to their role.

Once coordinated, the council will also be able to share best practice across all services and publicise the approach to customer/community engagement widely. Peers heard that opportunities to co-badge with partners and brand council services are being missed. Ensure customers know they are accessing council services and target communications and engagement strategies to develop a single strong brand and strategic narrative to deliver more impact.

Peers acknowledged the significant amount of work, led by the chief executive to engage and communicate with staff. Staff consultation sessions took place in January 2024 at the main council offices in King's Court, the Crematorium, the Depot, South Lynn Community Centre, and at Regis Place offices. This ensured all staff, regardless of their role could attend at a time convenient to them. The chief executive also held a 1:1 session with corporate apprentices.

The sessions led by the chief executive and the section 151 officer updated staff on the latest financial context, including the budget position and gathered feedback on the peer challenge report and staff ideas and opinions on how progress and improvement could be achieved. A dedicated email address getinvolved@west-norfolk.gov.uk is being used for feedback and for staff to indicate their preferences and ideas for future engagement.

The outcome of this positive engagement has led to meaningful progress on a number of the CPC actions impacting on staff and it is clear the council is now more effectively listening and responding to the workforce. For example:

- A staff survey was completed with an online response rate of 80 per cent and overall response rate of 70 per cent. Peers heard the action plan is in production; headline results have been shared with the leader and senior leadership team (SLT).
- Further engagement sessions with staff took place in May and June 2024 to draw attention to the new Corporate Plan.
- An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) has been introduced.
- A post implementation review of the working arrangements framework has been agreed and terms of reference agreed by SLT and Unison.
- A new intranet is being scoped to support better internal communications.

The improvement in staff communication was reinforced by conversations with staff peers met with, citing that there has been improved and impactful communication following the CPC. In an exercise with staff, peers asked for one word which explained how they currently felt. The results of this are presented at appendix A. Staff were positive in their views with many saying they were hopeful, optimistic, open minded and intrigued. Some frustrations remained, but these were directed at the pace of change and not the content of communications.

Staff strongly indicated to peers they wanted the improved communications to continue, and welcome being updated even if there is little to communicate or report. For example, with regard the staff survey results, peers were informed that the action plan is being developed and will include feedback and views from the staff engagement sessions. This appeared to be news to staff peers met and just needs a short message outlining the timeline to be shared.

Peers also reminded staff that they should take some personal responsibility for finding out information. With publicly available committee papers, intranet and weekly staff updates, there is an expectation that staff will read and share news.

There was still a view amongst staff that culturally and in practice, the organisation is continuing to work in silos and internal communications, the sharing of information between services, approach to team meetings, training and development opportunities and the cascading of information are inconsistent.

The chief executive is actively demonstrating the approach expected, however

implementation of new ways of working and change takes time to embed, and training and development and the sharing of best practice is required for managers to ensure a consistency of approach and correct dissemination of information. There is an opportunity with a new chief executive and SLT to reset expectations and requirements.

Strategic leadership and management

Recommendation 3 - The political and managerial leadership needs to take stock and think about how to make the council fit for the future.

Recommendation 4 - Re-focus SLT on strategic issues and empower managers to manage and deliver.

The political and managerial leadership of the council has undergone significant change since the peer team were on site in October 2023. Two executive directors have retired, and a new chief executive has been appointed to start in September 2024 following the announced retirement of the current chief executive. A new leader and deputy were appointed in May 2024, the cabinet reduced by one-member, new group leaders were appointed to the Labour and Conservative groups and a new Progressive group was formed. Political leadership remains with the Independent partnership and peers observed good relationships between all members.

Given the scale of change, it is not surprising that progress on recommendation three has been delayed until the new managerial leadership is in post. From September there is an opportunity for political and managerial leadership to meet and set out a clear vision for place and associated transformation. By keeping the SLT vacancies, the new chief executive can review the skills and experience required to support the political vision, transformation and change and create a team to deliver this.

In the meantime, the political leadership need to agree and develop clarity on their place vision. Peers were unable to obtain a single consistent response on this, which is not uncommon, especially for a new leadership team. However, for the council to move forward using the finances and resources it has available, there needs to be an established clear direction and priorities. The newly appointed chief executive can support members in this process, however peers advise the cabinet to come together and start developing this work over the summer, to accelerate and continue with collaborative discussions in the autumn.

Peers did recognise improvements to SLT meetings, with an established new terms of reference, increased focus and prioritisation on strategic items and more cross-cutting engagement between executive directors and assistant directors to avoid items coming forward for SLT which could be managed at the operational level. Some assistant directors described this as a work-in-progress, but it was clear positive efforts were being made to address the recommendation.

Monthly service manager meetings have resumed, and assistant directors are communicating more regularly with service managers. However, peers heard of inconsistencies in this and reference to silo working. There were some examples of peer-to-peer engagement and knowledge sharing but this was not yet common practice. Further work is needed to set the expectations and create a culture of collaboration if BCKLWN is to become one council.

Finance

Recommendation 5 - Use headroom to deliver ongoing annual revenue savings to address the underlying budget gap in 2026/27.

There has been positive work completed with SLT and cabinet to understand the financial challenges and to identify potential mitigations and manage the financial risk. All staff were engaged on the financial planning and budget during the January 2024 staff consultation sessions and there is a plan for this to be repeated in the autumn. An external provider has also been appointed to deliver budget consultation with residents.

An initial Cost Management and Income Generation (CMIG) plan has been developed and is being used to drive conversations with members and officers. The process of looking at the medium-term financial position, in preparation for 2026/27 has been delayed, but business cases have been submitted by services to identify efficiencies in the short term. At the moment these are not delivering the level of savings required, presenting financial risk; more work is needed with budget holders and assistant directors to ensure they recognise their responsibilities and take ownership of the CMIG.

Cost reduction/income generation is a workstream of the transformation programme, but as the board is still in its infancy, there hasn't been enough focus on what needs to be delivered and at what level. Once members have set the strategic direction,

officers will be able to deliver the programme of income generation opportunities and efficiencies. In addition, the council needs to review options for the overspend on the Guildhall project and decide whether it meets the shortfall.

Transformation and performance measurement

Recommendation 6 - Put in place a transformation programme that designs everything around residents and communities.

Recommendation 7 - Performance measures and data need to focus on priorities and outcomes and provide the right information for members to make decisions.

Following the engagement with staff in January and May 2024, a series of transformational workstreams looking at specific areas raised by staff were identified and are being led by staff volunteers from across the authority.

The workstreams focus on the following areas, with some more advanced than others:

- Cost reduction/Income Generation
- Digital Strategy
- Office Accommodation
- Internal Communications/Staff Engagement/Corporate Intranet
- Community Engagement
- HR Processes
- Corporate Performance Management System
- Culture and Values

A Transformation Programme Board led by the chief executive is in place to oversee the work and monitor progress of each of the workstreams. Board members have worked through the LGA transformation toolkit with their teams to help get people thinking about a broad range of potential transformation projects and identification of opportunities. There have been two board meetings which have generated lots of discussion and there is a tangible atmosphere of excitement amongst officers and members about the benefits transformation/continuous improvement could deliver to the council and communities.

Peers encourage the council to capture all the ideas and positivity and begin to bring

some structure and direction to the programme. Firstly, clarifying a consistent reference and language over organisational change – for example, is it transformation, continuous improvement, or something else? Then be clear about articulating what the council will look like at the end of the programme; clarifying the anticipated outcomes and the measures to be used to track and ensure targeted progress. Finally, there needs to be an assessment and recognition of the resources, capacity and skills required to deliver the programme. There may be additional skills required from outside the organisation, or some upskilling and retraining of existing staff. The LGA can support the council with learning and skills development through the offer on transformation support - [Transformation | Local Government Association](#). Peers were pleased to hear the council has already benefited from support of a transformation peer through the LGA Transformation Peer Support Programme as this will help in upskilling existing staff and bring experience from elsewhere where lessons have already been learned.

Peers understand a budget has been allocated to the programme, as the transformation programme is being developed, the budget should be regularly assessed to ensure the appropriate investments supports successful delivery. There could be more invest-to-save projects identified as the programme develops.

As part of the transformation work, the council has enlisted support from the audit consortium to review all the data and information it holds with a view to helping services understand how they can work better together. This is a good use of resources and an opportunity to break down the silo working expressed by staff.

There has been a reduction in the number of key performance indicators (KPI's). Officers recognise there is still more refinement to be done to support members in focusing on priorities and outcomes. Peers were pleased to see evidence of KPIs being used to drive better outcomes, for example in reducing the percentage of rent arrears on industrial units.

A new performance management system is being procured to bring together all the KPIs, Annual Governance Statement actions, risk register and Corporate Strategy actions. This will support better joined-up tracking of actions and identification of any interdependencies between data sets. It won't address the lack of responsibility managers take for their own service performance.

Peers heard about the strain and impact on resources needed to chase performance data and ensure the correct information is presented to members. Everyone with responsibility for a KPI needs to be accountable and take charge of reporting data through to the corporate team. Data needs to have a clear narrative and it is impossible for anyone other than the KPI owner to summarise this. Installing a new performance management system provides an opportunity to train managers on its use and remind them of their responsibilities.

Governance

Recommendation 8 - Undertake a governance review to focus meetings on adding value to decision-making and scrutiny.

Progress is being made on this recommendation with the Governance Task Group refocused to look at the current panel and committee structure and an informal working group commencing a review of the Council's Constitution.

The monitoring officer held a series of sessions with all directorates on corporate governance, engaging with all service areas to highlight the Scheme of Delegation to enable decisions to be taken at the appropriate levels and how these decisions should be recorded. Other areas covered within the sessions were:

- When governance goes wrong
- Council, Cabinet Member and Officer Decision Making
- Scheme of Delegation and onward delegations
- Scrutiny functions and remits
- Policy Framework – corporate and service areas
- Political awareness
- Best value Duty

Despite this extensive programme, there still appeared to be mixed levels of understanding at the officer level around roles and responsibilities. Some officers also reported members getting too involved in operational matters. Peers recommend the programme of training and development for officers and members continues with regular checks on levels of understanding, to ensure strong and robust governance is being exercised.

In their meetings with peers, members requested improvements to the operation and organisation of scrutiny. They asked that agendas are set through the panel and that a review of what reports go to the different scrutiny committees is undertaken. There appeared to be duplication of reports going to more than one committee and this was taking up time on agendas that could be used for other items.

Peers observed good relationships between members and the different groups. There was a request for all group leaders to meet on a regular basis and peers suggest this is good practice which can only increase the cross-party collaborative working.

Peers were also pleased to see the Kings Lynn Area Committee had been formalised (previously an advisory group) to become a decision-making body.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank BCKLWN for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review. Peers were impressed by the strong progress the council has made in implementing the recommendations from the CPC.

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.

We would be happy to meet and discuss how we can continue to support the council in achieving its vision and objectives.

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

5. Appendix A

This word cloud has been formed using the words staff used to describe how they are currently feeling about working for BCKLWN.

