

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Cheltenham Borough Council

5 March 2024

Feedback





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## 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during July 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:

- Update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- 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 Cheltenham Borough 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 Cheltenham Borough Council took place on 5 March 2024.

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

- Local Priorities and Outcomes
- Organisational and Place Leadership
- Governance and Culture
- Financial Planning and Management
- Capacity for Improvement

For this progress review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Jason Gooding – Director of Neighbourhoods, Wirral Council
- Councillor Sarah Butikofer – Chairman, North Norfolk District Council
- Kathryn Trant - Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met face to face in Cheltenham Borough Council over the course of one day with the following representatives from the council:

- Councillor Rowena Hay – Leader
- Gareth Edmundson – Chief Executive
- Focus group of staff
- Focus group of Cabinet members
- Focus group of Cheltenham Borough Homes staff
- Focus group of cross party Members
- Focus group of senior managers
- Focus group of External stakeholder from Business and Community

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) should be congratulated on the impressive progress made since the corporate peer challenge (CPC) took place in [July 2023](#). The recommendations arising from the CPC have been progressed through an Action Plan and the majority of these recommendations have been achieved. The Action Plan was updated and shared with the peer team ahead of the progress review taking place and sets out in some detail the progress made by the council against each of the original recommendations.

The peer team considered the council's updated action plan and further documentation that was provided, including draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion documents, proposed Member Induction timetable, reports related to the Housing Review and 2024/25 Budget papers, along with the outcome of meetings held during the day. Consequently, the following comments and feedback were shared with CBC, as set out below after each recommendation from the original CPC.

## **2.1 Golden Valley Development recommendation:**

*The Golden Valley Development project is well managed in terms of finance and risk. Now is the time to be engaging with communities, businesses and residents to look at how the council can create and measure social value; it is important that the council thinks strategically about what it wants to achieve, for example, a skills plan and a brighter future plan for the county to provide a pipeline to meet workforce requirements and ensure unique opportunities are not missed.*

CBC has made significant progress against this recommendation by improving engagement and progressing the social value work. Additional staff resources have improved capacity to enable that community engagement work to progress and the council is working in partnership to develop a 'Front Door' that will help to tie the different threads of activity around a clearly articulated vision for the region. A great deal of public engagement has taken place including a part page in the council tax leaflet delivered to every household setting out what Golden Valley would mean to people.

## **2.2 Ensure achievement of savings for 2023/24 budget recommendation:**

*Ensure there is the discipline to achieve savings targets included in the 2023/24 revenue budget. Achieving savings is an organisation wide responsibility, build accountability into management of teams and individuals through the appraisal process.*

CBC has established a savings programme which was refreshed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process and work is ongoing to ensure collective accountability across the organisation for budget and savings decisions. Whilst the budget papers were not specific regarding how the £2m+ savings target for 2024/25 would be met, in discussion with the s151 officer it was clear that a robust plan is in place and there is a credible narrative around how the savings will be achieved. Having that narrative is not the same as delivering the savings and careful ongoing monitoring will be important. An element of the savings is reported to come from the reorganisation of housing services and CBC may wish to consider sharing the savings plan with staff to allay the concerns that are only to be expected at a time of

organisational change. The council recognises that progress against this recommendation is ongoing and as discussions continue it will be important that members are engaged and understand the importance of prioritising resources.

### **2.3 Net Zero 2030 recommendation:**

*Refine the pathway to Net Zero 2030 in order to include clear performance measurements and milestones to demonstrate that the council is on track for delivery.*

CBC has employed an interim resource to support actions against this recommendation and as a result good progress has been made. It will be important to maintain the momentum once the interim resource is lost, for example that may be through cross council activity. During the original CPC there was a view that this priority had not been given the same significance as others, however, it is clear from the actions undertaken and plans that were shared with the team during the progress review this isn't the case. For example, specific climate objectives being drafted across the organisation to support delivery of the council's net zero targets will enable and encourage staff council wide to take action to support the Net Zero 2030 pathway.

### **2.4 Further align with Cheltenham Borough Homes recommendation:**

*Look for further opportunities for alignment with Cheltenham Borough Homes to support delivery of corporate priorities.*

CBC has made significant progress against this action and is now integrating CBH within the council. An interim senior management structure has been put in place and due diligence has been followed. Members are engaged as progress is the subject of a standing item on the Scrutiny committee agenda. This is a complex change and not without risk, but the consistent enthusiasm reflected by both CBC and CBH staff is a credit to the senior officers and members involved. There is an optimism about the opportunity to do things better and take the best from the two organisations.

A characteristic of complex change is different perceptions and understandings, and this was clear from the groups that the peer team met. For example, some staff believed there was a clear blueprint for the change over a specific timescale whereas

others felt the change would be more organic once the formal transfer had taken place. The council may wish to consider how to effectively communicate with clarity and empathy. For example, more face to face communication would be appreciated.

## **2.5 Undertake purposeful consultation recommendation:**

*Think carefully about communications and consultations. Consult with a purpose – there has been good consultation around the Golden Valley vision but there is a wider place shaping responsibility. Raise the council's profile and get people engaged and interested – create advocates for the Place.*

The council has progressed this action with the appointment of additional resource in January 2024 however it is too early for the peer team to further assess the impact.

## **2.6 Rationalise partnerships and meetings to work at a strategic level recommendation:**

*Consider rationalising the council's partnerships and meetings and creating a stakeholder framework. The council already works well at a project level, work at a strategic level to deliver Place leadership.*

CBC has met with key stakeholders to collect views on partnerships and governance. A review of community and partnership meetings is in progress with recommendations expected in Spring 2024. Rationalising the partnerships and meetings is expected to follow from the review and from a resourcing perspective it will be important to do this. The information shared with partners needs to be balanced; partners will always say they need to know more. CBC should focus its partnership work with partners, groups and societies who demonstrate positive help to shape and deliver the vision for Place.

## **2.7 Member Induction and training recommendation:**

*Improve Member Induction to support Members in understanding their roles and responsibilities and look to refresh Scrutiny training to give Members confidence to add value and constructive challenge.*

CBC has reviewed the Member Induction Programme ready for the whole council elections in May 2024, and it is positive to see the ambition for opportunities to extend Member learning and development over a longer term. The peer team would recommend that some of the sessions are mandatory to give confidence that Members will be making decisions with an understanding of the basic principles, for example, this is particularly relevant for Planning, and a wider understanding of the principles of Scrutiny will support good governance.

## **2.8 Embed the Cheltenham Borough Council culture recommendation:**

*Work to embed the culture of the organisation more widely so that all staff benefit.*

Progress on this action is ongoing and has rightly been delayed to ensure that the work covers employees from both CBC and CBH. There is a perceptible difference in the culture of the two groups of staff that we spoke to, but overwhelmingly the sense was positive, and, with the right communication, the council will successfully progress this work.

## **2.9 Develop processes for staff induction and appraisals recommendation:**

*Once the HR team is in place, develop processes for staff induction and appraisals that will include targets that link back from the council priorities, enabling staff to have a sense of accountability and responsibility. Alongside these processes, develop internal communications to be more effective, for example by providing regular updates to staff on the progress of projects and key priorities.*

The HR team have been in place since September 2023 and clear progress has been achieved since then. There is a new appraisal process and staff induction, however these are being trialled and not all staff we spoke to were aware. With the level of organisational change taking place, the importance of internal communications cannot be overstated and actions to progress this should take place as soon as possible.



## 2.10 Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) recommendation:

*The council should take the opportunity once the HR team is in place to co-produce an Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion strategy and policy. The inclusive culture that the council is already developing provides a productive environment for this work to be successful.*

CBC has progressed this action. An EDI Action Plan has been produced, based on the LGA Equality Framework for Local Government, and a staff group has been formed. The staff group principles include creating and championing a culture that actively promotes EDI, playing a central role in helping the council achieve the EDI Policy objectives and delivering the Action Plan. The group will 'engage, listen and learn from communities and work with them, partners and stakeholders to foster a culture of embracing difference and delivering services that work well for everyone'.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Cheltenham Borough 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.

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