


# **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review**

East Suffolk Council

08 November 2022

Feedback





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# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 22 – 25 February 2022 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 six months after the council published the CPC action plan, 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 East Suffolk Council (ESC) for their commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month 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 ESC took place remotely on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2022.

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

- Action plan progress
- Organisational learning and capacity
- Current and future challenges

In preparation for the progress review, the council provided peers with a short position statement serving as a bridge to reconnect peers with recent context and activity, including a RAG rated status of the CPC action plan summarising progress made with the recommendations.

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

- Steven Pleasant, Consultant, Lead Officer Peer
- Cllr Isobel Darby, Buckinghamshire Council
- James Mehmed, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met virtually via MS Teams over the course of 2.5 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Stephen Baker, Chief Executive
- Cllr Steven Gallant, Leader
- Cllr Craig Rivett, Deputy Leader
- Nick Khan, Strategic Director
- Andy Jarvis, Strategic Director

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

#### **Action Plan Progress**

East Suffolk Council have positively engaged peers through the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) process to support continuous improvement and to contribute towards the next stage of organisational development and strategic planning.

Following the acceptance of the CPC report by lead members and the corporate management team (CMT) an action plan was promptly developed whilst ensuring the organisation was kept fully engaged by the leader and chief executive through a specific all staff briefing. The report was also shared with key partners.

It was evident that the peer challenge process and the associated impacts have been far reaching. The report outcomes are now serving as an internal reference point influencing strategic planning, decision-making and for the incoming chief executive and council post May 2023 elections.

Since facilitating the CPC in February 2022, the context and operating environment have significantly changed through many external influences from the enduring

pandemic, the war in Ukraine, implementing operation London Bridge and the far-reaching economic conditions impacting cost of living, rising inflation and changes in the Government's approach which could impact local elections in May 2023 when all the council's members will be up for election.

More recently the chief executive has announced his retirement at the end of 2022 and the leader will not be standing for election in May 2023

Despite the many challenges, there was clear evidence that the council had used the CPC as a catalyst for change and improvement. Overall, there has been good progress on the recommendations with four of the six recommendations rated 'green' and are well advanced in delivering impact and two rated as 'amber' with good progress and activity that is 'work-in-progress' and will be delivered over a longer time frame.


### **Organisational learning and capacity**

The approach set by organisational and political leadership has enabled a culture of openness and drive for organisational learning. The CPC process has allowed the council a space for reflection and has provided a reference point for further organisational learning and development.

Despite the challenging external context, there is a strong desire to push forward with programmes, projects and organisational development. There a vigorous focus on future planning and ensuring the organisation continues to be best positioned for the future challenges ahead.

Significant progress has been made regarding the compliance issues experienced within the housing service and also with both rent setting and rent conversions. Since the peer team were on-site arrangements to provide increased governance and control are in place, as well as the engagement of specialist support and capacity to action the councils housing improvement plan.

Peers were impressed with the maturity around organisational learning. The council was quick to put its hands up and self-refer to the housing regulator and has been robust in asking 'how did we get to this point?' also exploring what lead to this deficit in performance and oversight. Through this experience the council have extracted



the key learning that will be robustly shared within the housing service and more widely within the organisation. A recent improvement intervention has been to the design of the housing structure changing the way people work, reducing silos and therefore creating more cross-cutting working to reduce service inefficiency and ensure there is more challenge built into the service operations. The council has a good working relationship with the housing regulator and has a desire to share their learning and experiences more broadly within the sector.

Peers were pleased to hear members are using the scrutiny process about engagement with tenants in preparation for new regulations. The evidence discussed with peers demonstrates an invigorated performance regime with increased focus on monitoring performance data, service performance and employee and team performance. As a result of experiencing the housing service performance issues, the council through its own reflection recognise how governance can be further improved across the organisation.

Peers were pleased to see that capacity will be improved from the actioning of one of the recommendations to increase senior corporate capacity. A recent recruitment process has resulted in the appointment of an additional strategic director who will have accountability for driving and embedding governance across all council functions and raising the profile with service managers. This extra capacity will also provide the chief executive with more time to take a helicopter view of the organisation and provide additional challenge and scrutiny to council functions and services.

The housing experience has influenced the way oversight and governance is being designed and operated within contracts with leisure partners and LATco's, providing further evidence that organisational learning is taking place.

Following previous support with the council's community partnership (CP) model, peers are confident progress has been made with realigning the purpose, function and form more closely to the original vision. Peers heard evidence that CPs are performing very well and members have confidence in the refreshed arrangements.

The cost-of-living crisis and subsequent 'ease the squeeze' campaign was positively progressed through the CP's, demonstrating their ability to work at a local community level to solve significant issues. The council recognise the outcomes to support

communities through the cost-of-living crisis would not be so advanced without the infrastructure of CP's. Peers welcomed that cabinet are currently discussing the longer-term funding allocation cementing their future for the next four years.

## **Current and future challenges**

There are a range of internal and external factors impacting the council. The chief executive will retire at the end of December and the leader will not be standing in the May 2023 elections. Some cabinet members have confirmed they will also not be standing for re-election, providing further turnover of senior leadership roles.

Recent recruitment processes have confirmed a newly appointed chief executive and a strategic director. Peers were informed that the ambitious plans the council highlighted during the February CPC are still a priority and continuity will be provided through the two existing strategic directors.

During this period of change, peers placed emphasis on the council not losing momentum and ensuring that the dynamic culture work is maintained. There is recognition that during the period up to the May 2023 elections the council needs to focus on delivery. It was positive to hear there is a maintained sense of energy in the council and examples where the drive and creativity is being made bottom up for example identifying funding opportunities and working at pace to submit an investment zone bid.

During the February CPC, peers recommended the council use the hot-house process to refresh the approach to prioritisation, capacity, governance and oversight. Peers learnt that the council would undertake this refresh following the May 2023 elections. A review of organisational structure and management capacity below strategic directors was discussed and needs to evolve with organisational requirements.

Peers were informed the council's financial position was seen as positive with members comfortable in how financial gaps would be managed. Budget pressures may result in some cuts being made.

The CPC process highlighted the polarised experiences and views of agile working. Peers were keen to see the council develop a clear approach to agile working and to



ensure this was clearly communicated.

The May 2023 elections are predicted to provide a reasonable churn with new members joining the council. Senior political leadership and the CMT are currently assessing the arrangements for agile working after the elections. Initial relationship building between members and officers is recognised by the council as being most effective when face-to-face. Spending time together was seen as essential to start building trusted work relationships. Peers were pleased to hear that strategic thinking around planning for new members was at an advanced stage with detailed attention being given to how best to nurture the new relationships required to facilitate positive working from the inception of a new council.

There was a strong recognition that the discretionary energy given by officers and members comes from a shared common purpose and attachment to common goals, which provides a risk if not managed. Peers were informed that these important issues are actively being discussed and risks being managed going forward. All these factors are influencing the future direction and approach to agile working and building effective working relationships.


A current staff engagement survey which is still 'live' is providing an early indication concerning the value staff place on agile working relationships with a desire to be involved in shaping future work space planning and building more collaborative working practices. The council will proactively use the survey outcomes to explore where the variations are in the organisation and ensure support is provided.

There is a clear recognition that managing agile working is far more demanding and complex than traditional 9 – 5 office-based working. The East Suffolk Evolve management development programme will actively support managers in making the transition to more remote management and supporting remote / agile teams.

There is a strong preference not to prescribe or mandate a fixed number of office-based days and to allow managers to work out the optimum arrangements for their teams.

Peers were keen to understand the current relationship with health partners and how the ICS is progressing. One of the strategic directors sits on the strategic panels with a colleague on the delivery side. Positive progress is being made in supporting the wellbeing in communities, aided greatly by the developing trust and engagement with





health colleagues. East Suffolk works with two health systems; Ipswich & East Suffolk and Norfolk & Waveney. One remaining challenge to be overcome is working out where to make the most impact and draw the most influence. Peers heard how the council is seeking to position itself to deliver the most impactful outcomes whilst balancing off capacity and resource. The council are interested in how they play a significant role and would like support from the lead peer who has extensive experience of working within health systems from both health and local authority perspectives. This will be arranged as follow up support.

In summary, the council has made positive progress with the CPC recommendations and used the peer challenge process in a far reaching and positive way. The council is focused on the priority areas and is in a position of strength with managing the transition following the imminent retirement of the long-standing and well-respected chief executive. The council is on its next stage of organisational development and with the incoming change of chief executive, additional new strategic director and incoming elected members is focused on delivering current priorities whilst planning and preparing for post May 2023 elections and refreshing the council plan using the well-established and engaging hot-house process.

Peers convey their gratitude to the outgoing chief executive wishing him a happy and healthy retirement having given 40 years public service and extend their best wishes and regards to the leader when he stands down from his role as an elected member next year.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank East Suffolk 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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