

Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Cambridgeshire County Council

24 March 2022



Cambridgeshire County Council – Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review

The Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during July 2021 and promptly published the full report with an action plan. The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a progress review, providing space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan.

The LGA would like to thank Cambridgeshire County Council for their commitment to sector led improvement as an early adopter of the revised CPC process. Working in collaboration with the LGA has enabled the progress review process to be designed around the areas the Council identified as delivering the most value, impact and improvement.

The progress review provided peers with a general overview of progress since the July 2021 peer challenge, including the status of actions against the recommendations and a thematic approach around three specific areas: Finance and Budget Strategy, Shared Services and Place Shaping with Partners.

The peer team consisted of:

- Chief Executive Peer, Kath O'Dwyer - St Helens Council
- Lead Member Peer, Cllr Michael Headley - Bedford Borough Council
- Member Peer, Cllr Bryony Rudkin - Ipswich Borough Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager - James Mehmed

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 some of the recommendations with summary progress.

At the time of the peer challenge, the new joint administration had only recently formed and were in early stages of working together. Peers could see how the joint administration have found their feet and further progressed their joint working relationships. Over the summer 2021 period, the joint administration delivered urgent work on budget setting, as well as aligning political priorities and policy making with the budget.

The joint administration has a newly developed Corporate Strategy which will set the direction for future priorities and delivery. There are now more forums for officers and members to collaborate and work closely together, including a strategic forum for committee chairs and vice-chairs to join up work the work of the different committees across the different policy areas, this is helping reduce an organisational culture of silo working. A new performance system has been established to monitor and report on delivery. Peers heard how the work on establishing the new forums is supporting a better understanding about what the joint administration is trying to achieve.

Peers were pleased to see some actions had been successfully progressed including achieving sustainable capacity in the Chief Executive role for Cambridgeshire resulting in the

recent appointment of a separate Chief Executive Officer and the completion of a review of 'This Land' resulting in a series of recommendations with actions already underway.

The position statement self-assessment indicates that many of the recommendations are work-in-progress (amber) with ongoing and longer-term actions and activity required to deliver sustainable and tangible outcomes, for example resetting roles with partners in the context of place shaping and recalibrating member role, behaviours and conduct.

Progress with Shared Services recommendations have paused following a period of initial activity, pending the appointment of separate Chief Executive Officers for Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and Peterborough City Council. Progress is now expected to move at pace.

The progress review included a meeting attended by opposition members. Peers received feedback regarding the effectiveness of current committee system arrangements and encourage an inclusive review to ensure governance arrangements are robust and effective. This is an existing recommendation within the CPC report.

Progress made in improving officer /member relationships and clarity of respective roles needs to continue and be further developed as these relationships and behaviours will be important in both delivering and managing the organisational changes that are being developed.

Finance and Budget Strategy

The Council has made positive progress in setting a balanced budget for 2022/23 and is starting to invest in political priorities.

The key implementation and future delivery of decentralisation, climate change priorities, understanding covid recovery and internal service change all need to be fully costed and agreed to enable robust planning for next year's budget and to inform the development of the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS).

Financial planning for next year and beyond needs to start now, maximising the full year to avoid delaying longer-term planning. In doing so peers highlighted the importance of engaging staff, a wider group of members and partners.

Peers encouraged the development of a plan or clear roadmap to agree a 3-year MTFS, which was acknowledged by the joint administration.

Peers were pleased to hear that the CPC process had provided the Council with the impetus to fast-track budget setting for 2022/23. Other notable points of delivery included the review of 'This Land' which was viewed as comprehensive and helpful to a range of stakeholders; the HNB significant in-year overspends now have a specific earmarked reserve to provide mitigation of cumulative risk; the implementation of triple line reporting taking on social, environmental and financial perspectives; an increased focus on medium-term planning and appraisal of investment requirements for transformation, decentralisation and localising services; shaping the budget to support the Corporate Strategy and challenge around dis-investment, ensuring the Council strengthens its link between the funding of priorities.

Shared Services

Peers could see evidence the Council has started work to inform future decision-making by commissioning a review of Children's Services and through facilitated support from Local Partnerships focused on exploring the scope and potential future shared service arrangements between Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council.

There is still more work required to ensure the Council has clarity about the outcomes required and what part the shared service arrangements play in delivery. The Council recognises the need for more pace and to ensure staff have direction. An options appraisal process being considered should provide objectivity and a detailed assessment to inform decision-making and political agreement. Considerations need to ensure appropriate strategic capacity and also link to the wider organisational change being discussed to ensure decisions are being taken in the round and that they support the achievement of the Councils vision.

Some quick wins have taken place, for example ceasing shared support to place shaping with the Executive Director of Place returning to CCC and working within the Combined Authority (CA) to ensure duplication is reduced, avoid overlaps with planning and increased joint working and support. Since early January 2022 CCC has its own management team which is proving productive having transitioned from an operations focus to a more strategic management team.


Once the Council has determined the future outcomes it wishes to achieve, taking the quick wins for accelerated progress is advised. Peers heard about the considerations and necessary strategic financial planning that will be required to ensure appropriate financial investment in any alternative arrangements to the current shared service provision.

Place Shaping with Partners

Peers were pleased to hear the Council share feedback regarding the workshops and events that have been held with partners to share the emergent thinking around place shaping. The work undertaken has strengthened relationships, which will be an important building block as the council and its partners continue to develop place shaping arrangements. The Council report a greater sense of trust, collaboration and one system ethos.

Peers heard about positive developments with the CA and within the emerging ICS arrangements. Peers noted the opportunity for the council to make greater connection between these 'place' and the 'people' strategic forums in order to better address the inequality challenges and the wider determinants of health. Peers also encouraged the Council to think about establishing its own future place shaping governance, identifying a partnership vehicle to shape the local placed based ambitions, with appropriate governance and oversight from within the Committee system. A clear vision for place will support the Council and partners in clarifying where they can bring the most influence, value and objective delivery.

Your emergent policy work on decentralisation has the potential to significantly change your local delivery model for the Council and partners. Peers feel codesigning the future model



with partners will be essential to ensure there is clarity about why you are taking this approach, what is in scope and how you propose to deliver. Role clarity will support joining up delivery and achieving a better understanding of the role each partner plays within the system.

Peers suggest the Council develops a simplified narrative for decentralisation proposals to ensure all stakeholders fully understand the emergent model to facilitate inclusive coproduction as well as ensure robust scrutiny can take place and inform decision-making.

Future Support

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. In order to support transparency, the council is advised to publish this letter.

Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser for the East of England Region is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Rachel is available to discuss any further support the council requires. rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk, 07795 076834.