

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Mansfield District Council

9 October 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during October 2023 and 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 Mansfield 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 Mansfield District Council took place (onsite) on 9 October 2024

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

- Recommendation 1: Swiftly agree the financial plans to assist in addressing the current and future challenges MDC faces.
- Recommendation 2: Maximise Collective Leadership Opportunities
- Recommendation 3: Prioritise key projects and create stronger visibility.
- Recommendation 4: Consider wider opportunities for Mansfield, and its partners, within the East Midlands region.

- Recommendation 5: Maximise the opportunity of the Overview and Scrutiny function.
- Recommendation 6: Build and sustain capacity to deliver MDC's ambition.

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

- **Lead Peer**: Jonathan Stephenson (Joint Chief Executive of Brentwood Borough Council and Rochford District Council)
- **Member Peer**: Cllr. Martin Gannon (Leader, Gateshead Council)
- **Senior Officer Peer**: Suzanne Jones (Corporate Director for Finance and Resources, Huntingdonshire District Council)
- **Senior Officer Peer**: Kirsten Burnett (Head of Policy and Organisational Development - Hyndburn Borough Council)
- **Shadow Officer Peer**: Caleb Ellis (Acting Transformation Delivery Manager, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council)
- **LGA Peer Challenge Manager**: Ernest Opuni (Senior Regional Advisor)

3. Progress Review - Feedback


Out of the CPC's 6 recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are completed/are progressed. There are none against which the council has not made progress.

The council provided the following updates on its progress on the Action Plan produced in response to the recommendations which emanated from the original CPC. The team's feedback on each is provided in turn

Recommendation 1: Swiftly agree the financial plans to assist in addressing the current and future challenges MDC faces.

In response to this recommendation the council has:

- Produced a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) which was subjected to Overview and Scrutiny and presented to Full Council for approval. The development of the MTFP was structured around in-depth engagement and



input from the council's Cabinet and CLT. Numerous workshops sessions were held to discuss savings proposals, looking at depth into consequence and impact of what these savings would mean to the residents and businesses of Mansfield. This approach will continue moving forward and has led to enhanced collaborative working across Cabinet and CLT.

- Developed an enhanced approach to tracking specific savings identified within the MTFP. Strategic ownership of savings within respective services rests with members of CLT and meaningful information is captured and monitored frequently. Finance/savings targets are a standard agenda item at both the Assistant Director Team Meeting and CLT meetings.
- Implemented a weekly finance meeting between the Section 151 Officer and the Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Finance to discuss the financial management of the organisation.
- Undertaken an in-depth review of the Council Plan and in May 2024 Full Council approved a new refreshed plan. The new corporate plan now has five core themes, which are 'Our communities', 'Our Organisation', 'Our District', 'Our Environment' and 'Our Economy'. These themes are to be supported by Theme Plans, which will set out how the vision, ambition and priorities of each theme are to be delivered and monitored.

With the importance of ensuring that our communities benefit from a resilient, financially sound and well-run council working in partnership the council have now set the following priorities under the 'Our Organisation' theme:

- Deliver robust financial planning.
- Maintain sound governance practices and informed and transparent decision making.
- Deliver value for money services that meet the needs of our communities.
- Provide a positive working environment where staff are proud to work for the council and have opportunities to progress.

The 'Our Organisation' Theme plan is currently in development and will give clear direction on how the above priorities will be strategically embedded across the organisation and subjected to appropriate governance.

Feedback from the Peer Team on Recommendation 1 Progress:

- There is a stronger shared understanding of financial pressures. The council is demonstrating collective leadership in recognising the need to have robust mitigations in place. It is important that these mitigations are corporately owned at the highest levels of the council to ensure that they can be effectively deployed in timely fashioned if and when required.
- Big issues are being actively managed and impact mitigated where possible
- There appears to be a robust approach to monitoring savings delivery and budget planning leading to a balanced budget for the forthcoming financial year. However -in common with most district councils- the situation remains challenging and warrants close management going forward.

Recommendation 2: Maximise Collective Leadership Opportunities

In response to this recommendation the council has:

- Undertaken collaborative workshops, held between Cabinet and CLT to support the review of the new corporate plan.
- Programmed a further workshop in the Autumn (November) to inform the development of corporate plan theme delivery plans.
- Developed the Cabinet Forward Plan with Strategic Visioning Sessions scheduled periodically within the plan to develop a more collaborative approach to planning and preparing for organisational change. Development of the Forward Plan engages Cabinet, CLT and Service Managers.
- Embedded collaborative workshops between CLT and Cabinet as part of the annual budget setting process.
- Jointly delivered staff briefings between members of CLT and Cabinet demonstrating shared ownership across political and officer leadership e.g. budget briefings.


Feedback from the Peer Team on Recommendation 2 Progress:

- There are some good and effective relationships between Portfolio Holders and ADs from what the team heard on 9 October 2024. This work is having a positive impact on communities. An example was around how communication with tenants has improved. The team were told about good, constructive challenge from portfolio holders which is helping to improve performance.
- There has been some good collaboration between Cabinet and CLT. (e.g. Corporate Plan refresh- described to the team as “a fantastic experience”. The team would encourage the council to build on this with regard to cross-service/portfolio considerations and discussions. This will be key to ensure the council has the corporate grip required in shared, strategic ownership of financial and wider transformation decisions.
- Staff and members all stressed the importance of an effective working relationship between the Mayor and Chief Executive. This was seen as important in setting the example throughout the council on how appropriate, shared leadership practices can be sustainably embedded. Working relationships with partners continue to be positive and are driving positive outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise key projects and create stronger visibility.

In response to this recommendation the council has:

- Ensured that updates relating to major projects are routinely provided to Cabinet, Place Board, Overview and Scrutiny Place (OSC) and Full Council.
- Enhanced the internal and external communications and engagement on key capital programmes/projects. Internally this has been achieved through the development of the council’s intranet now hosted as part of the councils SharePoint platform. This allows all employees to access the most up to date communications and for colleagues without a device, a hard copy of all correspondence is displayed on notice boards at all council sites. The use of Vlogs and news bulletins led by the CEO and Mayor are also now utilised,



alongside the referencing of developments via Extended Leadership Team sessions. Externally, the council liaises through its partners on key projects and programmes, most notably through the Place Board and its respective theme action groups.

- Undertaken a review of the councils' resources to support key capital schemes/projects. Since the CPC report the council has appointed a Senior Regeneration Officer to assist with wider service delivery, including the Townscape Heritage Programme, the business grants programme and project pipeline development. The Regeneration Manager maintains the strategic management and co-ordination of complex capital regeneration programmes. Alongside this appointment the use of capacity grant funding has been utilised, where appropriate, to obtain specialist support and expertise in programme and project management. The funding for additional resources/expertise is clearly identified and costed as part of the council's capital programme.
- Developed a long list of pipeline projects which, should new additional funding become available, the council would look to develop for local regeneration and economic growth. This list contains strategic information around the project scope and objectives and will enable the council to quickly mobilise to develop a business case for funding should opportunities present themselves, including from the new East Midlands Combined County Authority. While the new government's regeneration agenda becomes clearer, the council has continued to develop the case for Mansfield, notably via the currently suspended Long-Term Plan for Towns.

Feedback from the Peer Team on Recommendation 3 Progress:

- Mansfield District Council clearly have very strong plans and have made significant progress in getting a wide range of partners involved.
- It will be a key determinant of success that this approach is utilised into the delivery phase
- There is a clear recognition of the importance, value and opportunities of collaboration (e.g. CA, Health, strategic approach to delivery beyond own

boundaries)

Recommendation 4: Consider wider opportunities for Mansfield, and its partners, within the East Midlands region.

In response to this recommendation:

- The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has led a '*Districts Together Group*' which is made up of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Districts. The group has developed a unified prospectus of what districts offer and how they can support the work of East Midlands County Combined Authority (EMCCA). The Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Finance is a substitute on the EMCCA Board. The Elected Mayor has been appointed to the Scrutiny Committee for EMCCA.
- Ensured that matters relating to EMCCA are now a regular discussion point on the CLT meeting agenda, and updates are provided and shared with the council's Extended Leadership Team (ELT) and whole council through internal communications.
- Met with authorities in the West Midlands and the Yorkshire Combined Authority to learn lessons and understand how the development of combined authorities come to fruition, whilst also gaining insight on how the voice of district councils can be amplified.
- As a key stakeholder of the Mansfield's Place Board the council has been instrumental in aiding the development of the Board operating as a systems thinking led body, with the council playing a key role on the board and leading several subgroups.
- Benefited from the council's CEO chairing the Place Board Partnership, and the Place Board Forum, which has embedded systems thinking, and is developing strategic health projects across systems.

Feedback from the Peer Team on Recommendation 4 Progress:

- The council has the opportunity to take a more holistic approach to using system resources to target some of the most difficult place-based issues

- There is some strong collaboration particularly in system leadership alongside health. This bodes well for effecting the holistic approach the peer challenge team is suggesting.
- There is further evidence of effective partnership working beyond Mansfield's borders. The council has made significant progress in this space since the peer challenge in 2023.
- There is a clear ambition to deliver social value across all sectors.

Recommendation 5: Maximise the opportunity of the Overview and Scrutiny function.

In response to this recommendation the council has:

- Provided scrutiny training for chairs and specific budgets scrutiny training has been provided to identified elected members.
- Supported OSC's to ensure work programmes are in place and developed with greater involvement and ownership of OSC members.
- Reshaped OSC meetings agendas so that the work programme is a living document and committee members can reflect on areas of focus through the year.
- Carried out a review of OSC governance/structure and taken a decision to retain three committees:
 - Communities and Services
 - Place
 - Corporate Resources
- Agreed for Cabinet members to attend OSC meetings to discuss activities within their portfolios.

Feedback from the Peer Team on Recommendation 5 Progress:

- There is an enormous amount of training made available for all members, with the LGA training especially useful for newly-elected members.
- Delivering at the right level to ensure effective performance of the function (i.e. not 'tangled in weeds')
- Overview and Scrutiny is adding tangible value – officers describe feeling held to account more effectively.

- Structures in place allow all members to participate.
- There would be value in the council giving further thought to the role of Portfolio Holders in relation to scrutiny. There would be value in them attending some of the scrutiny meetings to have discussions and get the benefit of constructive challenge.
- The council could find value in undertaking a review of current scrutiny arrangements. This would include consideration of the numbers of committees and ensuring that the various work programmes of these are fully fit for purpose.

Recommendation 6: Build and sustain capacity to deliver MDC's ambition.

In response to this recommendation the council has:

- Sought employees to volunteer their time to help identify and shape areas in which they feel the council should develop skills and knowledge. The areas identified were linked to personal development and knowledge growth. Colleagues have created 7 task groups aligned to coaching/mentoring, digital skills, employee development, inclusive learning, learning culture, leadership academy and personal development reviews. Each group has met four times to create and take ownership of their own action plans. Examples of the key actions that have been taken forward include:
 - Digital Skills Check within the Personal Development Review.
 - New Coaching training modules.
 - Creation of the Leadership Academy Model.
 - Updated One-to-One templates and Personal Development Review.
 - Introduce quick and easy way to record personal development.
- Introduced an approach to knowledge development entitled Bite-Sized Learning. This series of development has been delivering learning sessions to colleagues which have been led from shared expertise, skills and experience across the council. Key topics concentrated on and delivered by subject experts include:
 - Culture and leadership
 - Teambuilding
 - Taking decisions and reports
 - Financial awareness, procurement and contracts

- Communications and customer service
 - Performance management
 - HR in practice
 - Health and Safety
- The implementation of Bite Sized Learning has been complemented by the provision of external coaches, on-the-job mentoring and e-learning. This builds on the foundations of our Leadership and Employee Behavioural Competency Frameworks.
- Launched a Corporate Coaching Strategy with a strong focus on the 3 elements of external coaching, internal coaching and coaching as a leadership style.
- Utilised the structure and support of the East Midlands Coaching Network and 'Mye-Coach' system. This means the council can now offer coaching as a learning tool to all employees and specifically focus on this within our Leadership Development Programme.
- Developed coaching and mentoring skills which are delivered through e-learning, masterclasses and NVQ level 5/7 accreditation.
- Committed CLT's time and involvement to our internal leadership development course, the 'Aspiring Leaders Programme'. The programme includes mentoring to support aspiring leaders with their research project and presentation.
- Supported managers to learn the key elements of a coaching conversation model, which they can use in their development and one to one conversations with team members.
- As part of our employee engagement groups, the council has received a demonstration and opportunity to review the 'Skills Builder Universal Framework'. Working across 850 organisation the Skills Builder Partnership includes 8 essential skills of listening, speaking, problem solving, creativity, staying positive, aiming high, leadership and teamwork. The employee engagement groups have been supportive of this tool as a stepped approach for transferable skills across all careers.
- Recently developed a Corporate Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Group supported by specific employee led groups for different protected characteristics.
- Begun to develop a Health & Safety Policy Working Group which is programmed to be established before the end of the year.

Feedback from the Peer Team on Recommendation 5 Progress:

- The ELT level feels more empowered, engaged and energetic. Members described feeling more able to have a say and to help harness the need for savings to drive transformation. Important to sustain this and ensure that ELT members are openly encouraged to bring suggestions to CLT.
- There is evidence of more cohesive working across teams at AD level and on cross-cutting issues (e.g. EDI, climate change, skills and OD issues). The peer challenge team were provided with examples of managers being comfortable leading, when appropriate, on issues outside their specialism.
- Good skills and talent development activity and examples of where this has assisted on transformational projects, with project work built into development programmes. This has also supported peer networking within the organisation.
- Good start in the collaboration between Cabinet, CLT and ELT – strong will to continue to progress in this vein and to remove any potential barriers.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Mansfield 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.

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