

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Plymouth City Council

23rd February 2023

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1. Introduction

Plymouth City Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) between 7th – 10th February 2022 and promptly published the full report as part of the agenda for the meeting of [Cabinet on 7 July 2022](#) along 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 Plymouth City Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This progress review was the next step in an ongoing and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

This section highlights:

- the main recommendations from the original peer challenge report
- the details of the peer team
- an outline of the process undertaken on 23 February 2023

Original Peer Team Recommendations

The peer team feedback report from the CPC that took place in February 2022 included the following recommendations:

1. Capture the learning from the positive engagement the council undertook with

partners through Covid and ensure it's not lost – take time to pause and reflect after a period of unprecedented activity and demand, and ensure the approach to consultation, engagement and customer experience is consistently positive.

2. Review key plans and strategies to reflect the post-pandemic 'new normal' i.e. increases in service demand, taking the opportunity to review ambition to ensure it aligns with capacity and resources. Developing a more consistent approach to using data and intelligence (including community insight) to drive service delivery and improvement and inform financial decision making will be fundamental to this.
3. Build on the effective relationships with external partners across a larger geographical footprint to maximise opportunities, especially those offered through the emerging County Deal, and support political leaders to enhance their visibility in these partnerships. As part of this, the council should consider reviewing the Terms of Reference of the Boards and their strategic rationale in order to simplify channels of engagement for all external stakeholders.
4. Continue to move forward proposals to review the electoral cycle to help to reach a lasting conclusion.
5. Undertake an external review of Scrutiny, looking to enhance opportunities for all members to engage with, and influence the policy agenda. Look to support this by refreshing the council's on-going member development offer so that all members can develop and maintain high levels of skills and knowledge.
6. Promote and embed risk awareness across the organisation and continue to address and report progress against key financial risks and external audit requirements.
7. Review capacity and clarity of purpose within the Change Programme to secure wider buy-in and consider securing transformational IT capacity when reviewing current contractual arrangements.
8. Develop a stronger corporate asset management approach/strategy, building in a stronger focus on delivering social value alongside the Growth Dividend and seeking to facilitate and maximise community capacity.

9. Continue to embed rigour and transparency in budget setting and monitoring – both revenue and capital – to ensure that financial challenges and risk are consistently understood and mitigated across the organisation.
10. Embed the workforce strategy including recruitment, retention, and succession planning, and continue to ensure sufficient organisational capacity to satisfy external audit requirements.

Timing, approach, and peer team

The progress review at Plymouth City Council took place on site on 23rd February 2023. The following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- **Councillor Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE** – Leader, London Borough of Bexley
- **Councillor Shaun Davies** – Leader, Telford and Wrekin Council
- **Jo Walker** - Chief Executive, North Somerset Council
- **David Hodgkinson** - Corporate Director of Resources, London Borough of Islington
- **Mike Harris** - Chief Executive, Southampton City Council
- **Gabrielle Mancini** - Service Lead, Customer Engagement and Transformation, West Berkshire Council
- **Kathryn Trant** - LGA Advisor South West

The team were joined by **Paul Clarke**, LGA Principal Advisor South West, as Peer Challenge Manager.

The review was undertaken on a hybrid basis with some of the peer team spending the day at Plymouth City Council and other members of the team remotely attending all meetings. Taking advantage of the opportunities of hybrid working, all members of the team met with the Leader and members of the senior leadership team to hear how Plymouth City Council had made progress over the last 12 months, the challenges faced and plans for the future.

The peer team later met with the Leader of the Opposition and Scrutiny Chairs to hear their views on progress made. There were meetings with two external stakeholders and members of the team attending in person spent time having a quick

tour of the city to see some of the areas of significance for the council.

The progress review ended with the peer team presenting their initial findings to a meeting of selected councillors and the senior leadership team, which led to a wide ranging and positive conversation about the progress made by the council to date and challenges that lie ahead.

The following section sets out the peer team comments and conclusions. It does not comment individually on the specific recommendations, but rather gives an overall view about progress and highlights some of the key strengths and challenges the peer team identified as part of the progress review visit.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Plymouth City Council has made a great deal of progress since the corporate peer challenge (CPC) took place in February 2022. The recommendations arising from the CPC have been progressed through an Action Plan which was shared with the peer team ahead of the progress review, and which sets out in some detail the progress made by the council against each of the original recommendations.

As referenced above, the peer team attending in person were shown a number of sites within the city that clearly demonstrated the council's ambition for communities and place. The peer team felt a strong sense of the council working collaboratively to maintain the direction of travel, despite an ever changing political and financial landscape. Although the conversations were brief, external stakeholders reflected positively on their experiences of working with Plymouth City Council.

Whilst acknowledging the progress that has been made, the council also recognises that there is still work to do, but what is clear is that the focus on the [Plymouth Plan](#) really does galvanise everybody.

The peer team considered the council's action plan along with the outcome of meetings held during the day and consequently shared the following comments and feedback with Plymouth City Council.

In terms of the council's budget and finances, it was clear that significant work has gone into identifying savings to be able to deliver a balanced budget for 2023/24.

This was achieved through significant senior officer and cross party membership working, and the peer team picked up a genuine commitment to embracing creativity and co-designing solutions across the whole member and officer cohort. As a result, the council is in a more positive place than it was in February 2022 and should celebrate the work that has been done.

There are still challenges, for example the council's level of reserves is low and a simple clear financial strategy that includes building up reserves and strengthening the finance function would be helpful. The council expects to present a five year Medium Term Financial Plan later in 2023. The approval of that plan by all members will be important, to ensure a united approach for the sake of future financial sustainability.

The outstanding pension issue has resulted in the 2019/20 council accounts remaining yet to be 'signed off' and therefore this needs addressing.

The peer team heard really positive comments regarding the cross party approach to budget preparation and the revised budget scrutiny process which it was felt had added value to the council. As a result of the transparency of the process there will be a clear picture for the future administration of the challenges that will need to be faced. There remains an opportunity to introduce regular capital budget monitoring which would add significant control to what is a large capital programme which hopes to deliver meaningful benefit for residents. Officers and members should prioritise resolution of previous audit recommendations related to pensions and minimum revenue provision pertaining to investment properties.

An external review of scrutiny has commenced with the initial phase undertaken by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS). There is further work to do, and it will be important to consider how the council can resource and enact the progress it wants and needs to ensure that the value of scrutiny is fully recognised, and the function adds real value.

It will be important that the next stages of the review allow for consideration of the data that is provided to scrutiny committees and how this enables the scrutiny function to fulfil its role for maximum impact and benefit.

The council is now actively addressing the development of its members and plans to seek accreditation through the [Member Development Charter](#). This shows a positive

commitment to developing and then maintaining high levels of councillor's skills and knowledge.

Capacity, like in many councils, is an organisation wide challenge, and some areas will be more affected than others. There have been a lot of changes within the senior leadership team over the last year and this has naturally impacted upon the capacity of the senior officer team. The peer team felt that in key service areas, most especially in both Adults and Children's services, the council should have a clear plan in place to ensure greater focus on the improvements it needs to make are effectively led and delivered. For example, resources will be required to address the outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection and make any necessary improvements to service delivery in Children's services, whilst in parallel Adult Social Care is responding to significant national reform. However, there are also capacity concerns within the corporate centre – the area that will be required to deliver the council's overall change and transformation ambitions. Investment in that corporate centre, such as project managers and Intelligent Automation, will be key to making improvements and savings and fulfilling the Customer Experience Strategy.

The council has invested time in staff engagement which has resulted in positive relationships and a sense of collaboration that is driving the council forwards. There is a desire to see staff listened to and empowered. The latest annual staff survey results indicated that staff are loyal, but workload is an issue. The council's new Organisational Development Plan, which is now in development, will provide structure and direction and will also link to the Change Programme generally. It will be important that the OD Plan helps to create capacity and equip staff to prioritise, as the ambitions the council has for the city need effective resourcing if they are to be achieved.

Consultation on a review of the electoral cycle is being progressed with a questionnaire being designed for circulation from June 2023. There remain different cross party views in respect of this and it will be important that this matter is addressed and resolved so that clarity of next steps can be achieved.

Plymouth City Council is maturing its approach to risk management. The Risk and Opportunities Management Strategy has been refreshed and working with colleagues in Health, Safety and Wellbeing, an interactive risk reporting tool is being developed.

Internal and External Auditor recommendations and requirements are now regularly reported to Audit and Governance Committee.

Plymouth City Council has had a very busy 12 months and like many other councils is facing challenges of capacity and resilience whilst coping with external pressures. Throughout the last year the council has still remained steadfastly focussed on delivering against the priorities in Plymouth Plan despite the many issues it has faced. This is testament to the effectiveness of that Plan and stakeholders' commitment to this. The progress the council has made with its CPC action plan is also to be recognised as positive and much of that progress has been recorded in this brief report.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Plymouth City Council for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review. There are areas of work in the action plan or identified through this progress review that the LGA will be keen to support the council with to help it progress, in particular:

- Seeking accreditation for the Member Charter
- Support and engagement with the council's OD Plan

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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