


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Wokingham Council

Wednesday 19 October 2022

Follow up note





1. Introduction	3
2. Summary of the approach	3
3. Progress Review - Feedback	5
4. Final thoughts and next steps	12
5. Annex 1 – Signposting	13

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 9-17 November 2021 and published the full report with an action plan in March 2022.

The progress review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process and is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Update peers on the 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 Wokingham 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 Wokingham took place remotely on 19 October 2022.

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:

- Paul Najsarek – Former Chief Executive, London Borough of Ealing
- Jon Bell – Director of Human Resources, London Borough of Barnet

In addition, the follow members were also on the Progress Review Peer Team:

- Cllr Richard Kemp – Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Liverpool City Council
- Sophie Poole - Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met virtually via MS Teams over the course of 4 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Susan Parsonage, CEX of Wokingham Council
- Clive Jones, Leader of Wokingham Council
- Stephen Conway – Deputy Leader of Wokingham Council
- Graham Ebers – Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources and Assets
- Matt Pope – Director of Adult Services
- Sally Watkins- Assistant Director of Chief Executive's Office
- Andrew Moulton – Assistant Director of Governance
- Graham Cadle – Assistant Director of Finance
- Mark Gwynne - Strategic Lead for Community, Strategy & Comms
- Jackie Whitney – Head of Customer Experience

Changes at Wokingham since November 2021

Since the original Peer Challenge in November 2021 there has been a change of control following the local elections in May 2022, resulting in Wokingham moving into no overall control.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Overview

The Peer Team observed that there has been a palpable and positive change at Wokingham, in tone, style and purpose and felt that they were encountering a council that was very different to a year ago which is a credit to the work of both officers and members.

The council has clearly embraced the issues they were facing at the time of the original peer challenge and turned them into opportunities using the financial position and a change in political control as an impetus for change.

The Peer Team were told that the new administration made a conscious decision from the outset not to 'shy away' from difficult decisions and understood the importance of getting quickly up to speed on the financial challenges facing the council.

In taking this approach the new administration has invested time in quickly establishing trust with officers, creating an open and transparent culture by encouraging discussion and challenge. The new administration has been keen to foster a collaborative and cross-party approach with Leaders of the other political groups taking up key leadership positions. The Peer Team heard that this approach is working well, and the administration is open to actively involving opposition members in scrutiny.

The Peer Team were particularly impressed by the mature approach the council has adopted since the team were last at Wokingham. This was evident in the new Leader and the way in which he works with officers and councillors from across the organisation. The professional way in which officers worked with members was also noted. The Peer Team could clearly see that officer member relationships were in a good place with mutual respect on both sides which is having a positive impact on the way the council is run. An example of this in practice was when a paper was brought to discuss a change in the election cycle. Officers and members described how there was an open conversation with evidence brought forward by officers around the different options, providing professional advice and outlining a preferred recommendation. Members reviewed this and decided not to agree the officer's

recommendation. However everyone involved in the process felt there had been an open, honest and mature discussion leading the political leadership to make their decision.

There is also evidence that Wokingham has become more externally focussed, seeking out good practice from other councils e.g. when developing the Arts and Culture Alliance as well working in partnership with the community in response to the cost-of-living crisis. The Peer Team also felt that the council's customer service work was stronger and were impressed by the Organisational Foundation Programme which covers six key areas: Customer Experience, Business Intelligence, Contract and Procurement, Asset Opportunities, Workforce and Community and Partnership, which felt integrated and coherent.

While the Peer Team could see the progress made, there are steps in the journey that the council needs to give particular attention to along the way. Staying focussed on the impact and purpose of what the council is doing and why, is key. At the start of any organisational change programme of this length and breadth, it is important to invest time in building a strong foundation, with a sound infrastructure and clear processes, as Wokingham are doing. However, in doing so, it is also important not to lose sight of what the benefits are to the residents and community. For example, in developing the council's response to meeting the challenges of climate change, poverty and social housing, always be clear about the impact the council is making. The Peer Team also encourages the council to look at sustainability of the improvements being made and ensure they are firmly embedded in the organisation so that in moments of crisis, the council is able to quickly respond alongside delivering business as usual.

It is clear that the organisation has made significant progress in building the foundations for improvement as set out in the original recommendations, moving from a directorate led approach and transforming to a corporate approach, which is welcome. As the council does this, it is important to retain the learning of what worked well in the directorate-based approach i.e., strong customer/user focus and corporate services as enablers of change, as the authority adopts a more consistent corporate approach.

In the original Peer Challenge the team recommended bringing to life the narrative

which sets out the ambitions and future vision for the place and the organisation. Work has begun on this, but the Peer Team encourages the council to purposefully continue to complete the job.

Equality, diversity and inclusion is an important theme that cuts across everything a local authority delivers. The Peer Team recognises that the organisation is on a journey to embedding EDI. The documents shared by the council reflected the progress made more fully than during the conversations the Peer Team had with the authority. Ensuring EDI is a core part of the leadership narrative is important as the council continue to embed their new culture.

3.1 Key recommendations

1	Restate and bring to life the narrative about the council's ambitions for its residents and the future vision for Wokingham – the place, the people, and the opportunities.
2	Recognise the role of council leadership in community and place leadership – and sometimes that means taking criticism and tough decisions.
3	Ensure that there is adequate capacity in core corporate services to drive forward change where needed – human resources, finance and change.
4	Continue to embed equality, diversity and inclusion for members and officers, and through the delivery of services.
5	Ensure there is a commitment to a long-term vision for the borough co-designed and co-delivered with partners to become the focus for the entire community.

The Peer Team heard that the council has invested a considerable amount of time understanding the new administration priorities, looking at key objectives particularly around partnership working focused around the investment of arts and culture. The council has also been keen to build on the community relationships developed during Covid by addressing the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis and bringing key charities into the heart of how the community responds and reaches people in crisis. The Peer Team were told that a lot of work has gone into strengthening the arts and

culture alliance. The council looked externally and reached out to the London Borough of Waltham Forest who were previously the London Borough of Culture. The council were keen to emphasise that the Arts and Culture is an alliance and partnership led, not a council strategy.

The Peer Team were told that work has been done to build in the skills and capability required in the organisation to support the strategy for partnership working, as well as to attract the right people to come to Wokingham. This has been linked in with the development of the customer strategy.

The administration were brought quickly up to speed by officers on the budget situation, prompting members to regularly communicate with residents about the scale of the challenge facing the council, and being open about the difficult decisions that need to be made.

3.2 Local priorities and outcomes

6	Further embedding of the council vision to act as a golden thread throughout all the strategies and consider future opportunities there are for building citizen pride through place making.
7	Identify the impact the adopted strategies have on the council's priorities and delivery plans and what a priority and non-priority means. Also invest in identifying how the outcomes of the adopted strategies will be evaluated, analysed and reported against.
8	The council has already introduced co-production as part of the development for new strategies, for example, domestic abuse, voluntary and community sector (VCS) strategy, anti-poverty. It is recommended that this partnership approach continues and to further enhance it, use of the new Wokingham Borough.

The Peer Team was pleased to hear progress that has been in taking a co-production approach to partnership working which is a cultural change for Wokingham. An example of this is the new Hardship Alliance that has been developed with partners which is a very much community led piece of work. Wokingham's aim is to create a borough vision that is shaped by the partners, which

requires a recalibration of relationships and building on the strong foundations that already exist. The council is moving into the space of enable and facilitator and working more closely with town and parish councils which requires more focus and a commitment. Another example is the council's response to the Cost-of-Living crisis and taking a co-production approach through the Hardship Alliance recognising that not one group can find the solution. The Peer Team were told that the council has developed a data cell, which pulls together the key indicators around the impact on residents which is analysed on a weekly basis with a view to seeing how partners can put in prevention measures.

The council vision is taking longer to embed, but the Peer Team were pleased to hear that the council was investing time, scheduling events throughout 2023 as part of their new council plan, to be in place from 2024.

3.3 Organisational leadership

9	Build on the council's ethos as a 'place for growth' by developing a strategic approach to organisational development, including talent management, leadership development, organisational culture and through continuing to promote its role in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).
---	---

The Peer Team were pleased to see that progress has been made in developing the organisational development of the organisation bringing stability, capability and capacity in the HR function. OD has been set as a key corporate project with the Director of Adult Services taking on the role of project sponsor. There is a new HR structure in place, a new AD of HR starts new in post shortly and a consultation has been launched around the new people strategy. The LGA is aware that work has been done on EDI through the council's equality and diversity training programme including modules on Allyship with EDI in employment, Anti-discrimination and By-Stander training taking place later in the year.

3.4 Governance and culture

10	Define the accountability and responsibilities of executive, scrutiny and the corporate leadership team and the differences between the roles and what that means for civic leadership. Subsequent to clarify the roles of statutory
----	--

	officers, their lines of accountability and how you hold each other to account to drive improvement.
11	Review whether the responsibilities and reporting lines of the Deputy Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Head of Internal Audit represent good governance and promote accountability.
12	Consider how to make overview and scrutiny more about positive challenge and producing good policy and less dominated by party political debate. Ensure regular opportunities for member development particularly on overview and scrutiny, modelling equality and diversity and behaviours that underpin good governance and visible leadership.
13	Recommend a review of the current election cycle.

The council has made good progress on governance. Senior staff were involved in the production of the annual governance statement to audit committee, integrating risk management in that process. There were also examples of 200 staff being briefed about different aspects of governance, to further embed this into the culture of the organisation. A governance dashboard is used to focus on areas of governance. A Governance Review was commissioned by CfGS (Centre for Governance and Scrutiny) in the earlier part of the year which has led to there being more of a focus on pre-scrutiny decision making, so that scrutiny plays more of a role in the quality of decision making. Training has been provided for the Chair and the Deputy Chair to ensure that scrutiny discussions are productive and depoliticised. Group meetings take place before every meeting now and the Chief Executive meets with all the Group leaders.

The Peer Team were also pleased to hear that a new Audit Committee member has 'raised the level of challenge' which is a positive development. Wokingham explored changing the current election cycle with a transparent and open discussion taking place with members who decided to stay with thirds. New ward boundaries will come into play when Wokingham have all outs in 2024.

The Peer Team also heard how the culture change of the organisation has changed with an increase in communication and engagement across all levels of staff. Senior

officers regularly meet to collaboratively come up with solutions for cross cutting work and a thriving managers network also exists. The council has introduced the 'Big Chat' polling 300 staff on key issues. Both the Leader and Deputy Leader have appeared.

This collaborative way of working has also extended to the council's approach to consultation and seeking views of residents and to engage in the way services are shaped and delivered. Currently every resident is being invited to share their views around collecting waste.

3.5 Financial planning and management

14	Restate what risk management and mitigation means for the organisation; who is accountable for delivering it and what the consequences on non-delivery are.
15	Develop financial scenario planning to test and flex wide scale savings plans. To enable the council to 'future proof' its future financial sustainability in the advent of significant potential financial pressures.

The Peer Team were told that the understanding of good risk management is being increasingly understood in the organisation. Risk management groups exist across all departments depts and there is more clarity around what the key risks for the organisation are.

The Peer Team were also informed that the council has brought in more scenario planning into their financial considerations, particularly following the impact of Ukraine, the tail of Covid and the Cost-of-living crisis which involved a number of away days to crystallise what are the most important elements for the council. The council has undertaken an assets review to identify the best use of the council footprint and where to make savings and discussions are already taking place with service managers around managing suppliers in light of the rise of inflation. The council also recognises that customer experience is a key part of that - reducing failure demand as an example.

3.6 Capacity for improvement

16	Ensure that the finance, human resources and change functions have appropriate resource and capacity to deliver what the council needs.
17	Articulate and accelerate an ambitious organisational development strategy including a clear employer brand.
18	Undertake a communications review to support building a communications and engagement strategy to use social media to show success and pride in a proactive way and to build and share the future vision identified in the key recommendations.

There was clear evidence that Wokingham has focused on building its capacity in particularly bolstering their change function. The Peer Team were also informed that key roles have been appointed building capacity in the corporate centre such as a new AD of Finance as well as a new AD for HR and OD. As mentioned previously a new OD strategy has also been developed and a communications review is underway with a view to strengthening the communications function.

Wokingham have also developed a comprehensive cross council approach with their Organisation Foundation Programme. As part of this, the Peer Team were told that work is underway with the Customer Excellence workstream, and a new website is being developed looking at customer journeys.

The Peer Team were told that officers feel that this approach has made the Corporate Leadership Team more joined up as a result with joint ownership across senior officers in owning the key challenges facing the council.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Wokingham 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 several the areas identified for development and improvement and would be happy to discuss this.

Mona Sehgal (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA), and their e-mail address is mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk

5. Annex 1 – Signposting

Wokingham has already been open to receiving a range of support from the LGA since the Peer Challenge. Additional support to consider is listed below:

- **Political mentoring** – through the LGA’s political group offices member mentors from other councils can be arranged for senior councillors. Typical mentoring engagements stretch over six months, providing the space for honest conversations, to be challenged and supported in a confidential environment.
- **Leadership Essentials programmes** – a series of programmes and workshops designed as themed learning opportunities for councillors both in Leadership roles as well as in opposition. Event concentrates on a specific portfolio area or a specific theme. The LGA can also deliver Leadership training for a cohort of officers or members at the council offices including political awareness training, how to be an effective ward councillor and scrutiny training.
- **Equality peer challenge** – the LGA can offer a bespoke equality peer challenge using the Equality Framework for Local Government.

This page is intentionally left blank