


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole
Council

1 December 2022

Summary Feedback Report





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1. Introduction

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (BCP) undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2021. The council subsequently published the report that followed along with an accompanying action plan, detailing how they intended to address the peer team's recommendations.

The progress review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process, normally taking place roughly six months to a year from when 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 peers' 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 BCP Council for welcoming this progress review and for their commitment to sector led improvement.

2. Summary of the approach and Peer team

The progress review at BCP took place in person on 1 December 2022. During the day the peer team met with over 50 key internal stakeholders (including senior officers, members and staff) to discuss and report upon the progress that the council had made since the Corporate Peer Challenge, and specifically against the overall recommendations the peer team made as part of that process. The council also wanted the peers to give more specific feedback on the progress, opportunities, and challenges in relation to the council's finances and governance as part of the process.

The day culminated with the peer team engaging in a 90 minute 'round table', with most of the council's Cabinet members as well as the Directors Strategy Group in attendance, shows the level of commitment and engagement in this process from the council.

For the progress review, the following members of the original CPC peer team were involved:

- Zina Etheridge – NE London ICS Chief Executive, NHS (was formally CEO at LB Haringey)
- Duncan Whitfield - Strategic Director, Finance and Governance, LB Southwark
- Kathryn Trant – Regional Advisor, LGA (SW Team)

They were also joined by:

- Cllr Andrew Proctor – Leader, Norfolk County Council (LGA regional conservative peer)
- Emily McGuinness – Senior Regional Advisor, LGA (SW Team)
- Paul Clarke – Principal Advisor, LGA (SW Team)

This report summarises the findings from that day.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The council embraced its first CPC which took place in November 2021. Since then, the council has fully engaged with the SW LGA Team in terms of sector led improvement and this has been very positive. Likewise, the publication of the original CPC report [LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Final Report 2021 \(bcpcouncil.gov.uk\)](https://bcpcouncil.gov.uk) , which was followed by the development of an action plan ([BCP CPC Action Plan](#)) to address the recommendations from the report, (aspects of which have or are in the midst of being delivered) evidences the council's commitment to sector led improvement.

This report does not aim to list all the action locally that this has led to, which is

extensive, but to summarise the key messages and specifically the feedback at the 'roundtable'

First and foremost, there has been progress in a range of areas and many positives to report. The bullet points below evidence these and reflect either specific peer team recommendations or wider council improvement actions, highlighted with the LGA report.

- The council and its leadership have actively engaged in the new health and social care landscape and that is very positive. During the original peer challenge the peers felt that the council's primary leadership focus had been orientated to a physical place led agenda, and it was now clear that this has been rebalanced with a significant investment of time and energy on behalf of the council's political leadership into shaping proactively the Integrated Care Partnership Strategy. The council now provides monthly updates to the Integrated Care Board and the peer team felt this shift in emphasis was a strong and impactful change.
- In the same vein, we heard that the weaknesses that have been evident within the council's children's services, leading it to be classified as inadequate by Ofsted, are being addressed. For example, the council is now actively working with Hampshire County Council as its Improvement Partner. Additionally, its second Ofsted Monitoring visit in October recognised improvement had been made. However, it is equally recognised that there is much still to do before the council can evidence sustained improvement in this area.
- We heard about the real progress in respect of the council's climate change ambitions. BCP has enhanced its capacity with the appointment of a new Head of Climate Action. Furthermore, it is developing and preparing to launch (Feb 2023) the 'Local Climate Partnership' and is also in the final stages of drafting a Climate Action Strategy to be published in March 2023, including a revised climate action plan.
- When the CPC peer team visited in November 2021, BCP requested a review of the 'Summer Response'. The peer team found that the council's summer response was overwhelmingly positive and a great example of place leadership. This excellent work continued for the summer 2022 season

making it another great success. It will be useful now to develop and sustain this excellent work by ensuring this becomes 'business as usual' and part of the normal forward planning process.

- The peers heard about the tangible benefits that were now being derived from the council's focus on culture change, embracing of EDI and starting to mainstream both this and its transformation plans into the council's 'Business as Usual' way of doing things – all of which were key aspects of their improvement plan and response to the original peer challenge. This is a very important message to hold on to, and the evidence of significant strides being taken in terms of embedding equality and diversity in service delivery, employment practice and as a community leader in a short space of time was positively recognised by the peer team. Furthermore, it was clear that establishing a distinct BCP culture and set of behaviours was now progressing well – albeit that this now needs wider and richer staff engagement. It struck the peer team that this was now starting to establish a far more coherent foundation for the council's future organisational development plans, and this should be something it continues to build upon.

Reflecting on the strengths and observations above, it was also clear that for many areas the foundations of change continue to be built upon and were essentially 'work in progress'. A clear example of this was in respect of communications, where the peer team had recommended improvements should be made in this area. A year on from the CPC, the appointment of the new Director of Marketing and Communications has been a significant catalyst for change, and the delivery of more effective internal communications (such as regular updates from the Chief Executive) as reflected in the culture change work above is testament to this. This work needs to continue that positive trajectory and become more embedded, as that cascade of information remains patchy, we were told, depending on where you sit in the organisation. Also, it needs to be matched with a greater emphasis on how the council's ambitious agenda and fantastic vision for place is reflected in a more effective external communication plan, with purposeful dialogue with residents, communities, and key partners at BCP. If the council achieve this, then it really will be giving the impression that it is now truly One Council.

It is important to recognise that the examples above, plus others the peers heard

about, are evidence of a council that is looking to get on the front foot and realise the ambitions for the locality and council that were set out at the time of Local Government Reorganisation in 2019. However, there are areas where the council has either made insufficient progress or continues to be beset by difficulties which does not reflect well on its reputation. The peer team discussed these issues with the council at the 'round table'.

The peer team identified 2 key areas in their feedback:

Governance and effective relationships

The council has continued to struggle to establish effective governance arrangements and the member to member, and sometimes member to officer relationships, leave much to be desired.

The council's constitution continues to be a bone of contention, and within that the effectiveness and focus for scrutiny, equally so. The council does take active steps to address this, indeed BCP Council's constitution is under continual review and all suggestions for amendment are brought before the Constitution Review Working Group, which is a cross-party working group, before going to Audit & Governance and on to Council and this is very positive. The peer team heard different reasons why there remains issues about effective governance and in truth this appears to be less about the process of scrutiny, nor indeed the efficacy itself of the council's constitution. Often, it was because stakeholders, and especially the council's members have such diverging views and opinions, that reaching consensus on the practical implementation of good governance remains very difficult. This is important as it leads to poor member behaviour, which is often played out in the council chamber, where members across the floor, and from all parties do not do themselves justice.

The council has all out elections in May 2023. Our advice is that in advance of the elections that the respective group leaders commit to working collaboratively to improve governance and behaviours. This is important, so they have a clear plan of action for the new council from May next year which can help it move forward. This is likely to require external support, review and challenge to help effect meaningful change, and the LGA can provide advice, guidance, and support for this.

Financial management and sustainability

The issues all councils have been facing in respect of responding to the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and increased service demand are well known and are having a real impact upon the financial sustainability of many. This is equally true at BCP, but this is also a council that has to some extent been also structurally disadvantaged by the lack of proper funding for the change required following LGR. Therefore, its' plans in relation to achieving financial sustainability into the medium term, including its investments, acquisitions, disposals, and borrowing have also been the subject of external scrutiny and reporting. The peers absolutely understand the challenges this creates.

Therefore, the peer team felt that the council's mid-year reset of budget was wise and well timed and necessary adjustments have been made in order that the council deliver a balanced budget for 2022/23. At the time of the progress review this was being estimated at an £8m underspend, but linked to the comms messaging referenced earlier, when we met with stakeholders, they all had various views as to the budget 'problem' and the level of in year and on-going pressures. Getting a clear message on this, that is shared, owned, and communicated effectively is very important. This should allow the council to be more confident and clearer in its financial messaging, but it will be important as to how it then also plans and communicates those messages. It is also an important message for the council's senior officers and staff to hear as they will clearly be seeking reassurance around the financial prospects of the council.

Whilst the council as a consequence of its actions mid-year, is now in a stronger financial position as it approached year end, it has done so by in part stopping spending e.g., Libraries. There is much to do now and into the future still to get that balance and overall approach going forward right. We heard about the potential for and offer from government of a capitalisation direction. Given the actions the council has already taken and more planned, it is yet to be determined whether that support will be required. Indeed, from the peer team's reading of the council's recent cabinet papers, it is moving towards a balanced budget proposal for 2023/24. We did see some 'below the line' savings targets, that maybe required to achieve this and indeed the council's plans for 2024/25 as well, and the peer team encouraged the council to deal with these and look to achieve them as early as possible, as to do so will help

reduce the likelihood of further mid-year resets. All stakeholders recognised that this will be an ongoing challenge so keeping this as first order priority is key. To that end there is benefit in the council welcoming an LGA led finance peer challenge sometime during 2023/24 to ensure that external challenge and advice around the council's finances.

The peer team felt that the Cabinet and Corporate Management Board meetings which have been a regular and recent feature of discussions and planning around the budget, were a significant improvement of note and something now to build upon. It helps demonstrate collective and an accompanying broadening of responsibility for financial management across senior officers and Cabinet; this will be so important as things get tougher. In the peer team's view, keeping 'on top' of the changing financial landscape is critical and reviewing where those responsibilities are held and deployed will be an important way of maintaining control of this challenging agenda into the future.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

Part of the peer team's reflections and feedback to BCP at the 'round table' was that as a council it often seemed to the outside world as being 'A Tale of Two Cities'. On one hand the council has achieved several the intended outcomes of LGR in 2019 and now takes its place nationally as the 6th largest Unitary council in the country. However, on the other hand many of the wider LGR benefits have not yet materialised and these issues were constantly holding back the potential of a council that should rightly see itself as 'the city by the sea'.

Those issues holding the council back have been identified within this summary report and are well known. There has been a lack of progress in some key service areas, notably children's services, albeit that is now being grasped. Furthermore, the on-going issues in respect of governance and effective relationships internally, continue to hamstring the council and do nothing to enhance its reputation. Likewise, the continuing challenges it is facing with its financial capacity and longer-term future

sustainability means that addressing this is of upmost importance.


As a consequence of the above, the peer team would encourage the council to work hard on its narrative for improvement and change and specifically suggest the following:

- continue to diligently work to address those key service area deficiencies.
- establish a clear plan, this side of the May 2023 elections, with all group leaders, on how it intends to improve its governance and member relationships e.g., through a coherent and comprehensive Member Induction Programme that looks beyond structure towards a clearly articulated set of behaviours. The LGA is very happy to support and broker such discussions. If this is to happen it must have clear outcomes agreed and collectively signed up to.
- develop a sustainable MTFP, with clarity of ownership, responsibility, challenge and communication being key aspects of this. This will give confidence to internal and external stakeholders. The council may wish to consider welcoming an LGA led Finance Peer Challenge as part of its response to this during 2023.

The Peer Team felt that many of those who attended the 'round table' feedback session, acknowledged, and recognised the messaging within this report – it has acknowledged the council's progress since the last CPC, but also highlighted some of the areas which still clearly require attention. We trust that these matters will now be proactively addressed and when BCP has its next Corporate Peer Challenge (we would suggest that this is no later than 2024/25, given the election cycle), that the peer team conducting that Peer Challenge are able to report very positively on how the council is maturing into a well-regarded, well led and well managed council.

The LGA would like to thank BCP for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review, and for the peers who took part. We would encourage the council to share the findings of this progress review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions 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.

Paul Clarke, LGA Principal Advisor paul.clarke@local.gov.uk is the council's main point of contact with the LGA and would be happy to discuss further support to the council, following this progress review.