

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

East Devon District Council

Corporate Peer Challenge – 6-8 February 2024

Progress Review – 28 November 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

East Devon District Council (EDDC) undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 6 – 8 February 2024 and promptly published the [full report](#) and 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 EDDC 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 EDDC took place onsite on 28 November 2024.

The Progress Review focussed on each of the key recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge which took place 6 – 8 February 2024.

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

- Kath Marriott, lead peer, Chief Executive Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Mike Every, member peer, Deputy Leader, Cotswold District Council
- Kathryn Trant, peer challenge manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Of the CPC's nine recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 89 per cent of actions are completed or progressed and 11 per cent (equivalent to one recommendation) has been paused.

The peer team were pleased to note how much progress had been made by the council since the corporate peer challenge had taken place just nine months earlier. It was clear from the RAG rated action plan and from the presentation received by the peer team on site, that EDDC has made significant progress which was a positive reflection of the hard work that has been undertaken by the council. EDDC has embraced improvement, and this is evidenced in the action plan which includes not only the key recommendations made by the peer team but also includes progress against additional comments and suggestions that were mentioned in the CPC feedback report.

For the purpose of this progress review report, the peer team focused on the nine formal recommendations which are set out below, along with the peer team comments.

Recommendation 1: Recruitment of a Chief Executive

'Progress the plans to recruit a Chief Executive and ensure sufficient capacity at director level to support the leader and councillors with strategic vision and provide vision and direction to staff'.

Recruitment of a permanent Chief Executive has been achieved, and this was followed by recruitment into director level posts so that the executive leadership team (ELT) is now at full strength. This has addressed the capacity issues that were previously providing a challenge. The Chief Executive referenced positive external support and mentoring and the peer team view is that the opportunities to benefit from this support should be taken advantage of by all members of ELT.

Recommendation 2: Consideration of Cabinet working arrangements

'Consider and explore options for Cabinet working arrangements, for example, making space for strategic workshop sessions with senior management so that the

Cabinet can work even more effectively’.

The peer team commend the council for good progress with this recommendation. Good working relationships between Portfolio Holders and directors/assistant directors is evident and demonstrates mutual trust. Most Portfolio Holders are now presenting reports at cabinet which helps to reinforce the line between strategic direction and operational delivery.

Recommendation 3: Invest in councillor and officer development

‘Invest in an ongoing programme of councillor development and training and political awareness training for staff to ensure wider understanding of the roles and responsibilities of councillors and officers respectively’.

Progress has been made to address this recommendation and work is ongoing. Audit and Scrutiny development sessions for councillors have been positively received and a working group of councillors will produce a programme of councillor development.

Political awareness training will be delivered to staff. This is important because newer members of staff may not fully understand how a council works or the range of services it provides.

Work is planned on a review of broader staff development and development of role profiles in line with job families. This will help to identify any single points of failure and therefore build resilience.

Whilst there has been progress on internal communication and visibility of senior managers, the peer team would encourage ELT to ensure consistency of communication across the directorates so that the same message is heard organisation wide. This will be appreciated by staff and will help them to feel valued by the council. Take the opportunity to raise visibility of councillors by considering a photo board in reception and at the depots so that staff know names and faces.

Recommendation 4: Streamline the actions in your new council plan

‘As the council’s new council plan is developing, further prioritise the number of actions that sit under the four themes in the new council plan and delegate and

empower staff within the organisation to deliver those actions across the life of the plan’.

The council plan is ambitious, and the peer team recognise that the actions to deliver the plan have been streamlined and prioritised to achieve this recommendation. It is positive to hear that over the life of the council plan, cabinet will regularly review and prioritise the actions.

There is an opportunity now for involving staff in service planning at all levels of the organisation as the ‘golden thread’ runs from the council plan through individual directorate and service plans.

Recommendation 5: Resist the temptation to undertake further external reviews

‘Consolidate the learning and recommendations from the reviews the council has undertaken and focus on addressing the actions arising from the various reports. Continue to build on governance improvements systematically reviewing all elements of the council’s governance and implementing improvements where necessary’.

The peer team recognise that the council has worked on embedding the recommendations from external reviews and that actions are regularly monitored, and progress tracked, either through the Annual Governance Statement or by reporting to cabinet, whichever is appropriate.

In time, the peer team suggest that the council sense checks to ensure due diligence is proportionate on all things such as ensuring the appropriate delegations are in place should a quick decision need to be made.

Recommendation 6: Develop a programme of external engagement and make outwardly focused work a priority for the new Chief Executive

‘Develop external engagement with partners and stakeholders for example, undertake work with town and parish councils to include planning matters and host a regular Developer and Agents Forum that includes officers and the portfolio lead for planning. The new Chief Executive should prioritise work on an external focus and profile for the council; external partners are waiting to work with you at a district, county and regional level’.

The peer team heard of excellent progress with this recommendation such as the Water Summit, the Devolution and Anti-Poverty project, and plans for a town and parish council event and a voluntary sector thank you event.

The peer team would suggest that responsibility for external engagement does not sit only with the Chief Executive but that the wider team of directors help so that diary clashes are mitigated and resilience is brought to the leadership group. The same message applies to the wider cabinet in supporting the leader and deputy leader.

Recommendation 7: Consider using councillor and officer ambassadors

‘Consider using councillor and officer ambassadors to address reputation management and assist with ‘myth busting’. Sense check where the council is now and where it wants to be’.

The peer team heard that progress against this recommendation is paused, however, there is an opportunity for all managers to be involved in internal communications. Staff reflected to the peer team on a recent all staff session which was well received, and they are keen for the next one. Perhaps sharing how often they will take place will help to manage expectations along with outlining how internal communications will operate such as using videos for example.

Recommendation 8: Review visibility with housing tenants

‘Whilst ensuring greater visibility with housing tenants is underway, ensure that engagement with them is effective and meaningful to sense check what they would find valuable to support the relationship between housing tenants and the council, and simultaneously address performance’.

The peer team heard of a number of examples of work undertaken to achieve this recommendation. These include appointing tenants to the housing review board, plans for a ‘getting to know you survey’ to ensure data held is up to date, transactional surveys to assess customer satisfaction with repairs and a tenant event held in August 2024.

The peer team recommend ensuring that relevant financial information is robust, and the council is able to make decisions where needed.

Recommendation 9: Provide direction for leisure and culture provision

‘Identify some specific principles for leisure and culture provision that include timescale and budget parameters to ensure a financially sustainable model of service delivery’.

The peer team heard how the council was committed to this work and that workshops had taken place to consider options and challenge the status quo. Leisure services can generate income which would enable you to utilise funding elsewhere. Think about leisure and culture services as a district wide portfolio rather than duplicating activities as the new town leisure centre is developed. The work with consultants will help to identify ways to make provision of leisure services cost and tax efficient, and the council may wish to talk to other councils too about identifying opportunities.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank East Devon 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.

Paul Clarke (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is paul.clarke@local.gov.uk