


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Lichfield District Council

25<sup>th</sup> May and 8<sup>th</sup> June 2022

Feedback





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## 1. Introduction

Lichfield District Council (LDC) undertook a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2021 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place approximately six months following the CPC, 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:

- The action plan and how this aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- Peer reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' - including any further support needs
- Discussion on any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank the Council for its commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month 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 LDC took place on 25<sup>th</sup> May and 8<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

The progress review focused on each of the recommendations from the CPC but also included a wide-ranging conversation. This note is not intended to capture all of the details of the conversations but provide an overview of progress since the CPC in November 2021.

For this six-month progress review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Cllr Simon Bound – Leader, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council
- Karime Hassan CEX and Growth Director, Exeter City Council
- James Millington, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA



Peers met with the Council over the course of 3.5 hours with the following representatives:

- Cllr Doug Pullen – Leader
- Simon Fletcher – Chief Executive
- Christie Timms – Chief Operating Officer
- Anthony Thomas – Assistant Director and s151 Officer
- Alison Bowen – Performance Review Officer
- Alfie Thomas – Governance Review Officer
- A session with a group of LDC staff from across the Council.

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback


The peer team was very impressed by the progress made by the Council in regard to the recommendations and the overall pace of change which LDC is moving at to meet its ambitions.

The Council confirmed oversight and monitoring of the implementation of the CPC recommendations sits under the council's Being a Better Council programme. The programme board is chaired by the Chief Executive and the Leader chairs the steering group, with progress of the recommendations monitored monthly.

Key discussion points are highlighted below against each of the recommendations:

**Recommendation 1 - Develop clear outcomes for the strategic plan for the remainder of the plan's period. Identify resources and processes with programme management arrangements to produce a golden thread from the strategic intent to the delivery plans.**

The peer team heard that these outcomes were discussed by Cabinet on 10<sup>th</sup> May ahead of adoption by the Council. This sets out LDC's strategic priorities for the next 2 years and includes the mid-term Cabinet priorities, to cover the remainder of the



plan's period. The service planning process is being rolled-out with staff and includes performance development alongside KPIs. As the Council further develops its target operating model these will be refined.


Further to the Council's intentions outlined during the CPC, the Social Progress Index (SPI) indicators are being used and metrics from this will be aligned to key outcomes which each assistant director will be accountable for. This will provide a golden thread from strategic intent to the delivery of individual objectives.

The peer team were impressed by the progress made at a successful Cabinet and senior officer Awayday held on 6<sup>th</sup> April with discussion including: the council's approach to reserves; priorities; resource requirements; and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Decisions were made on the council's priorities and the 10 year capital funding programme. The peer team felt this was a really positive step and that LDC is making good progress in developing a financial plan to deliver its key strategic priorities.

**Recommendation 2 - Invest time in setting out the decision making process for major priorities, including good project management disciplines e.g. project gateways, and being a better client.**

LDC notes there has been some delay to its original plans, but the Council has now identified the approaches to project management to be used for: the Being a Better Council programme; major projects and development projects; and ICT. Clarity, including which project management approach applies where and the approach for business cases, project initiation and delivery arrangements will be agreed. A Being a Better Council Director is being recruited to lead on this and deliver a clear framework, supported by a centralised project support team.

The peer team emphasised that good project management relies on processes and discipline and it was good to see how this was being taken forward. This should provide the Council with clarity of where and when decisions are made, a point which the peer team raised in November 2021.



**Recommendation 3 - Embrace the Council's role as leader and convenor of place: For example, understanding how the Integrated Care System requirement to support broader social and economic development could be leveraged for the benefit of LDC's residents; or engaging with a wide range of partners in developing the Active Living Strategy to identify opportunities to join up around key outcomes.**


The Community Power Strategy was launched in March 2022. This is now being further developed and the Council is considering other elements including the Youth Council and locality working. Support for councillors, including their role as community enablers within a locality model is critical and is being explored, with a model to be identified by September 2022. The peer team encouraged the Council to stay focused on this and ensure all councillors were engaged through this process, able to feed into this and their support needs addressed.

A District-wide strategic plan, Vision 2050, will be developed with key partners to establish clear ambitions. LDC are leading this and consulting with key stakeholders over the coming 12 months to develop the Plan, using data to inform the priorities and undertaking extensive consultation for 3-4 months - aiming to engage around 5,000 people - across the District.

The peer team supported LDC's plans and encouraged it to consider the techniques needed to help people think long-term and to reach out widely, including to young people and institutions. Data is important but the Council will also want to continue to focus on building its credibility using different engagement techniques - this takes time but is worthwhile to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to shape and own the vision.

**Recommendation 4 - Consider whether LDC has sufficient capacity in place for the Being A Better Council programme to proceed with the scale and pace set out.**

In recognising this is ongoing work the Council is continually reviewing how this is being resourced and is monitoring the pace of change. The peer team support LDC's approach to this.



The structure was established in November 2021 and the Council is beginning to see the impact of this. At present LDC's officer leadership team are feeling the challenges of continuing to provide leadership to the Council and balance the capacity needs further down the organisation to deliver services. The Council is recruiting to tiers 2 and 3 and this is due for completion by mid-August 2022 and when finished will help address the current capacity issues. LDC recognises it is vulnerable due to a lack of adequate resources in place during this recruitment period.


The peer team emphasised that this recommendation was made to ensure that the resources required were kept under review. As part of this revisit, staff the peer team spoke to recognise the journey LDC is on and are feeling the pace of change - but they really appreciated the clarity of leadership. Staff the peer team spoke to expressed a clearer sense of direction – with positive messages of being “really busy - but this is good!” and that “everyone understands their objectives” with frontline staff also commenting on their awareness of the strategic intentions of the organisation. This was a very positive message from staff. The Council will want to reflect on what the changes will mean for staff when the new management arrangements are in place.

LDC is confident of meeting the financial gap of £1m during 2022/23 and £700k in 2023/24.

The peers recommend the Council continues to consider what success looks like, and that the outcomes are achieved in line with the cost/benefit of the investment.

**Recommendation 5 - Members to consider how their frontline role might evolve to enable a full contribution to and effective oversight of the four outcomes of the Being A Better Council programme, and consider appropriate support/development e.g. data and evidence led policy making, community leadership/engagement, commercial focus.**

LDC is reviewing the development offer for councillors. This will be informed by the SPI ward level data and councillors will be provided with information on this, to review what this means for them and its relevance locally when engaging within their ward. Support will also include community engagement tools, and LDC has reviewed



this part of the Member development offer, including looking at the methodologies available via New Local.

The Council's approach to new ways of working is being designed to provide clarity for all councillors on the member enquiry process including the timescales and quality of responses expected. The induction process for newly elected councillors following the all-out elections in May 2023 will be redesigned to be clearer and better reflect need.

The peer team agreed that it will be important to continue to focus on this. As LDC council officers and councillors are on the journey of increasingly looking outwards as an organisation it is important to ensure that all Members are included in this and are co-designing the approach and identifying their support needs. The Member Development Plan should focus on how LDC provides councillors with the skills and support required throughout their councillor career.


**Recommendation 6 - Acknowledge the current uncertainty of how the new hybrid working model will operate and take steps to empower managers to work with their teams and experiment/test out how the model will work best for them and their customers.**

LDC has put significant focus on this since the CPC and has encouraged teams to work in a hybrid model since the lifting of Covid restrictions at the end of January 2022. This has been supported through the Being a Better Council programme, the Belonging & Wellbeing Strategy and Building Use Policy. Staff the peer team spoke to felt informed and were really positive about the approach which has been taken by the Council.

**Recommendation 7 - Review the LDC Communications and Engagement Strategy. As part of this, undertake a full stakeholder analysis and determine the appropriate mechanism to communicate progress of the council's key priorities both to partners and residents.**

As part of the Community Power Strategy, key organisations have been mapped. The Council is very keen to maximise engagement opportunities through the





voluntary and community groups and have commissioned a piece of work due at the end of July to investigate this further. This will be aligned to the Vision 2050 consultation and development.

The peer team discussed whether there was a partner/key stakeholder committee which could support this agenda. LDC confirmed that it is identifying how to reinvigorate these structures and how best to work with other organisations with consideration to the existing and potential District-wide forums.


It was clear that LDC recognises this as an important aspect of its external focus. The peer team encouraged the Council to continue to look at the forums it can use to have conversations about Lichfield. There is lots to do but the Council are being active, and the peer team encourage it to continue prioritising this.

**Recommendation 8 - Set realistic expectations around the timescales for delivery of the Birmingham Road Site and develop and deliver a communications/engagement strategy for the next 12 months targeted at local residents and other key stakeholders.**

In January 2022 the Council committed publicly to demonstrable physical progress on the Birmingham Road Site within the calendar year. The Council is progressing this as a major priority and taking a phased approach to developing the site.

At the end of May 2022, LDC announced that it is looking at options to deliver a cinema and exploring a joint venture arrangement. Keen to ensure Lichfield has a vibrant town centre offer phase 2 will then include the development of food and beverage units. The Council are progressing with other parts of the site including around the bus station, and liaising with partners including the County Council, and soft market testing with local and national housing developers in June.

As well as undertaking remodelling works to its office space, creating a café and hosting Citizens Advice South East Staffordshire within the Council Offices, it has developed small business incubation space. LDC already has one commercial deal in this new space with a small business – with further discussions planned with prospective businesses over the coming weeks. Additional conversations are also advancing for other potential uses of Council owned assets.



The peer team was impressed how the Council is now progressing these plans at pace, seeing merit in the phased approach set out to 'keep it tight'. These are also extremely uncertain times with labour supply, inflation increases, interest rate rises and cost of living pressures potentially feeding into consumers spending less. Maintaining development momentum is challenging and not without risk and LDC is seeking to manage this risk in a pragmatic way. The Council will want to keep the position under careful review and consider these factors and the impact on the timing of predevelopment work and construction.


Ensuring the public are engaged and informed of progress is important and LDC should continue to create opportunities and deploy a range of communications mechanisms to explain the progress that is being made (linked to recommendation 7).

**Recommendation 9 - Recognise, support and protect your tourism and economic offers – ensure the new Economic Development Strategy encapsulates this.**

LDC has carefully considered its approach and moved away from developing an Economic Development Strategy at the present time and is instead developing a clear set of principles and a plan for the next 12 months. This will outline how the Council can best support the 'bounce back' following Covid and consider the current challenging economic period. However, a Strategy based on data and insight will be developed in due course and will include wider thinking about the approach to tourism and maximising the opportunities for the District, including converting more visits into overnight stays and connecting visitor offers as part of a coherent proposition.

Through its engagement with businesses, for the next 12 months, LDC has identified how it will continue to help protect businesses through the £500k grant scheme. The Council is also focused on offering support, recognising there has been 300+ start-up businesses in the District over the last 2 years. LDC will focus on how best to support these including through the provision of the incubator space.

The peer team recognised that this felt like a good approach for Lichfield, and the conversations held with staff working within Economic Development as part of this 6



month review demonstrated that Council is clearly focused on supporting this important area.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank LDC for undertaking the 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.

Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Helen is available to discuss any further support the council requires [Helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.murray@local.gov.uk).