

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Leeds City Council

11th September 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) at Leeds City Council (LCC) during November 2022 and promptly published the full report with 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:

- 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 Leeds City Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. The team would particularly like to thank Alex McEwan-Hannant and Dion Jennings for supporting the team before and during the return visit to Leeds. 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 Leeds City Council took place on 11th September 2023.

The progress review, using the comprehensive review programme for the day, focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

- Values, culture and workforce
- Locality working
- Transformational approach as an organisation
- Financial planning
- Work beyond the city

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

- Chief Executive Peer – Pat Ritchie CBE
- Officer Peer – Sarah Reed, Executive Director, Corporate Services, West Northamptonshire Council
- Officer Peer - Jon Rowney, Executive Director, Corporate Services, LB Camden
- Peer Challenge Manager - Judith Hurcombe, Local Government Association

The peer team met face to face in Leeds City Council on Monday 11th September with over 60 representatives from the council including:

- Cllr James Lewis, Leader of the Council
- Cllr Debra Coupar, Deputy Leader of the Council
- Cllr Jonathan Pryor, Deputy Leader of the Council
- Cllr Dan Cohen, Chair of Scrutiny Board (Children and Families)
- Cllr Abigail Marshall-Katung, Chair of Scrutiny Board (Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth)
- Cllr Andrew Scopes, Chair of Scrutiny Board (Adults, Health and Active Lifestyles)
- Cllr Stewart Golton, Chair of Scrutiny Board (Children and Families) & Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group
- Cllr Alan Lamb, Leader of the Conservative Group
- Tom Riordan CBE, Chief Executive
- Mariana Pexton, Director of Strategy and Resources
- Victoria Bradshaw, Chief Financial Services Officer and S.151 Officer
- A range of Chief Officers and Heads of services, senior managers, groups of middle managers and frontline staff as well as Staff Network Chairs

3. Progress Review Feedback

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge of Leeds City Council (LCC) in November 2022 described a very well-led, ambitious and collaborative council, a beacon of best practice, delivering for and with its communities, partners and stakeholders. It has

made clear and tangible progress on the recommendations made by the peer team, with the council building further on its many strengths over the past 10 months.


The council actively seeks external perspectives and views to help it improve further. Between the peer challenges of 2016 and 2022 LCC had clearly acted on the first CPC's recommendations and other feedback, and we saw widespread evidence that it has considered and is acting upon the reflections from the peers last year. The November 2022 CPC recommendations have been incorporated into the Being Our Best organisation plan, agreed by the Executive in June 2023. Members and officers are energetic and enthusiastic about shaping and planning further improvement to deliver the council's clearly stated values and ambitions for their city, whilst being realistic about the challenges ahead.

Values, culture and workforce

In June 2023 the Being Our Best organisational plan was published, setting out LCC's vision to be the Best Council and the Best City, and responding to the recommendations in the 2022 peer challenge. The concepts of Best Council, Best City and Team Leeds are widely recognised and understood on a day-to-day basis, underpinned by clear and consistent internal communications and engagement which are regarded by recipients as open and honest. Councillors, staff and partners recognise this approach and collectively there remains a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to the council and the city.

The leadership and management development programme launched in 2022 includes around 2,300 managers continues to provide development opportunities for aspiring, new and existing managers. It was recognised that these managers are a key cohort in sustaining and developing the values and culture of the council. Sessions are hosted by the Chief Executive and enable direct engagement with key corporate messages, and the first meeting discussed the results from the staff survey and the Being Our Best organisation plan. An issue for the council to consider is whether the evident success of the Be Your Best programme so far is starting to create demand for training and development opportunities for those outside of this cohort or the new aspiring leaders programme cohort, and whether tackling this could contribute with resilience and staff retention issues.

Whilst a year ago Equality, Diversity and Inclusion had an already and significant,



growing profile, the focus since then has been to accelerate and normalise it as part of the day-to-day business of the council. Earlier this year the Be Your Best managers participated in face-to-face EDI training, and this is having a wide-reaching impact across the organisation. Participants told us of their growing understanding and willingness to take a more inclusive approach, challenging themselves and each other. They really value the members' and senior leadership's encouragement and this training as being instrumental to their improved confidence and feeling supported in managing their staff. There is enthusiasm to consolidate this further with engagement and service delivery for residents and communities. This new approach has clearly invigorated participants and has created an audible buzz about what is possible on EDI in Leeds, as well as creating wider ownership and supporting more distributed leadership within the council.

Between April and May 2023, a council-wide employee survey was undertaken. A key question asked participants to rate their jobs at Leeds with an overall score out of 10 and resulted in 76% of participants scoring 7 or more. Ninety-one per cent of respondents reported they know what is expected of them. Whilst the results were in line with the pulse surveys undertaken during Covid, the areas of concern from respondents included team meetings, workloads, management support, availability of tools, IT and systems, and career progression.

The survey results have been incorporated into the management information dashboard, which also enables managers to make comparisons with other teams and services. Further analysis of the data has been undertaken at the strategic level to enable comparisons to be made between the highest and lowest performing areas and different demographic groups. Following the publication of the survey results the Corporate Leadership Team identified actions for managers and teams including career progression opportunities; quality tools and IT equipment; workloads; and supporting staff to feel valued. Staff engaging with the peer challenge progress review were aware of the staff survey, and the results for their service areas.

An EDI scorecard has been developed by the council's HR team and the Leeds Office for Data Analytics to help the council better understand the diversity of its workforce.

An issue flagged in the staff survey has been stretched workforce capacity and

workloads, and whilst this is a common concern across many councils, it is acknowledged as a major challenge by the leadership team as well as by members and staff across the council. It was also identified by employees to the peer team during the peer challenge in November 2022. A wide range of formal and informal support and consideration is given, and time and workload management courses are being provided in September and October 2023 to help managers with their workloads and supporting their staff. Reviews of systems and processes are underway to simplify approaches and remove duplication.


There is a strong and ongoing focus on health and wellbeing which employees describe as being a huge corporate priority, encouraging people to share concerns and take action including:

- one service has put in place dedicated wellbeing capacity in addition to the service line managers.
- the creation of a mental health group for men
- Wellbeing Wednesdays in the council's call centre to encourage colleagues to improve their physical and mental health and occupational therapist support and resilience training at the call centre
- embedding the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

Mindful of the ongoing workforce challenges the council has introduced a new course for managers on change management, aiming to support better understanding of how people engage with and respond to change. Mandatory change training will be launched for the Be Your Best manager cohort during 2024, and its scope will reflect issues arising from the staff survey.

Locality working

Locality working continues to represent an issue of strategic importance to the council and there is potential for members to have a different role in the future as stronger advocates of their communities. Activity continues across the city to explore the model including a greater focus on impact in priority wards and the 12 most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Leeds.



A priority ward delivery group has been established and priority ward partnership plans now incorporate the use of the Social Progress Index to help gauge the impact of work in the 6 priority wards. Assets have been assessed and mapped across local areas and one of the next steps will be to scope rationalisation of assets. A review of community centre provision is also nearing completion.

Support for councillors on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is being incorporated into the member development programme.

The review of Community Committees is underway. The peer team heard a variety of views about the review and suggests that there is further work to do on clarifying what the review is aiming to achieve and what is in and out of its scope, and how it relates to transformation.

The breadth and depth of the localities work is undoubtedly complex with a variety of partners, anchor institutions and leaders within the council. To date, the council has adopted a distributed leadership model, and this has been successful in galvanising energy and commitment across the system. Looking ahead, it may be useful for the review to consider whether it would be helpful to treat this as a more explicit change programme with a clear set of outcomes and a focus on delivery: this may help the review to gain more traction and impact.

Transformational approach as an organisation

The peer team noticed positive energy around transformation and change and an acceleration in approach over the past year. More emphasis is being placed on using the Being Our Best plan and five change priorities to improve the overall coordination and synergy of the programme.

This has been supported through recruiting new posts. The strategic focus on transformation is being supported by creating extra capacity within specific teams such as Children and Families, Adults and Health, Core Business Transformation, Integrated Digital Services, and is complemented by additional corporate resources. This growing area of activity has a growing strategic oversight which needs to continue, so that the new posts and approach contribute to a stronger cross-cutting and corporate ethos which enables more to be achieved than by a range of posts sitting within services. There is much to learn and share from within departments for the wider benefit of the council. New finance and human resources systems with

user-centred design are being implemented and there is a clear work programme for implementation and resources in place to support this delivery.

Children's Services pressures in Leeds are high, and consistent with the demand-led pressures in other upper tier councils. Looked After Children numbers remain broadly unchanging. Recruiting and retaining social workers is difficult and this also has an impact on the workloads of existing staff. Enhancing capacity in Children's Services, based on strong evidence-based approach with strong executive level leadership and buy-in with social care workforce, should help to deal with this challenge. A members' oversight group including both Deputy Leaders and relevant Executive Member has been created to support children's services delivery in the context of the Financial Challenge.

The council at all levels of the organisation - political, corporate and service - is aware that it needs to undertake more transformation to meet both the financial challenges ahead, as well as to deliver its ambitions for its communities. Although the workforce is very loyal and readily identifies with Team Leeds, capacity and resilience need ongoing attention. The scale of transformation required will be challenging and will test this resilience further.


Work beyond the city

The council continues to bring influence and inform at national levels. This includes pressing for change on the funding of children's social care, economic growth, housing and the future of local government.

As the financial environment continues to become more difficult, further consideration is needed on whether the council is maximising its membership and role within the West Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. Councillors voice concern about the council's capacity to deliver programmes for the sub-region when its capacity is so stretched.

Financial planning

There is collective senior leadership of the budget and the challenges presented by service demand pressures and the in-year overspend of £34m projected in September 2023, whilst the council has always managed to address budgetary issues, this is the largest it has had to face to date. A further £59m of savings are



required for the 2024/25 budget. Overall Social Care costs amount to around 70% of the council's expenditure and Children's Services pressures are a significant factor in these forecasts. Members and officers are open about the scale of the budget gap and the need for collective efforts to address it, including new ways of working dealing with demand, delivering services differently and whether the traditional role of local government is still feasible within the resources available. Some members and officers feel there is more potential for savings through new approaches to procurement and commissioning.

The council will need a very clear plan for balancing the budget, with clear accountabilities for delivery across the organisation. This will be challenging for everyone, both politically and managerially, as these savings will be difficult to achieve and will require discipline and rigour. As the council prepares to deliver its organisational plan and further develop its approach to transformation it will need to address a number of issues, including:

- What will deliver the necessary savings over the next 2-3 years?
- Are resources in the right place to deliver those savings and transformation?
- Has enough consideration been given to what the council can no longer afford to do, or which could be done in better ways which meet the needs of residents and communities and which balance cost effectiveness with impact and ambition?

The council is in a transition period as it plans to reset its role within the financial envelope available. The next two to three years will require strong leadership because difficult decisions will be required in setting and delivering a series of tough budgets, and Leeds does not have high levels of reserves on which to draw, which would cushion some of the impact. Public services are under significant pressure, there is uncertainty over the national political direction, and the workforce is loyal but tired. Councillors' commitment to their strategic ambitions for the city and its communities will be tested and challenged, particularly in stopping doing things and moving away from established practices and provision.

There is recognition and willingness to embrace change, commitment to its stated ambitions and priorities, and an ongoing vision to be the best council, with the best workforce in the best city. We saw evidence of the council responding well to the peer challenge recommendations made a year ago. These are positive indicators for

further improvement.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Leeds City 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.

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