


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Reading Borough Council

31<sup>st</sup> March 2023

Feedback





1. Introduction .....	3
2. Summary of the approach .....	3
3. Progress review – feedback .....	4
4. Moving forward and next steps .....	11

# 1. Introduction

Reading Borough Council undertook a Local Government Association (LGA) corporate peer challenge across the four days from 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> June 2022. The council published the related report on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

A progress review is an integral part of the corporate peer challenge process. It is designed to provide the opportunity for a council to:

- Update peers on the progress made in relation to the recommendations made by the peer team and to receive feedback on this
- Consider the 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 impact and learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank Reading Borough Council 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 the LGA and sector-led support.

## 2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at Reading Borough Council took place remotely on the morning of Friday 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023. The following individuals, who were all part of the original peer team, were involved:

- Denise McGuckin, Managing Director, Hartlepool Borough Council
- Councillor Nesil Caliskan, Leader, London Borough of Enfield
- Rebecca Peck, Assistant Chief Executive, West Northamptonshire Council
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The Leader, the Deputy Leader, the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and

Resources, the Chief Executive and a number of senior management colleagues participated in the session on behalf of the council.

### 3. Progress review - feedback

#### Senior Management Appointments

At the time of the corporate peer challenge in June last year, it was announced that the then Chief Executive would be retiring from the council. The peer team recommended that the council ensure absolute clarity in relation to what was to be sought in appointing a new Chief Executive. The council undertook an external recruitment process, which concluded in September, and Jackie Yates was appointed.

A new Director of Children's Services has also been appointed recently. This is a joint role between 'Brighter Futures for Children' (a not-for-profit company wholly owned by the council and set up in December 2018) and the council. Further change will be taking place at the Corporate Management Team level over the coming months with the Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services moving on to another role within local government and the Executive Director of Social Care and Health retiring.

#### External Focus

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the senior political and managerial leadership of the council become much more externally focused. This principle has been embraced by the new Chief Executive, who reflected the importance of the council's leadership having greater visibility in the local community and being fully engaged with partners across key sectors and at the sub-regional and regional levels.

The Leaders and Chief Executives of the six councils across Berkshire are now meeting more frequently, whilst the Leader has been appointed to Chair the Integrated Care Partnership for Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West.

The Leader and Chief Executive have been visiting a number of the large businesses that are located in and around Reading in recent months. They have also been engaged in discussions with the Chamber of Commerce and Reading College. Key aspects that have been focused on in these discussions include workforce and skills – around the gaps that exist and how they might be addressed and the role that local employers and institutions can play. Within this have been talks about opportunities that might be made available to local young people. One example is that of creating work experience and apprenticeship opportunities – including for the public sector in order to assist with recruitment challenges in such areas as Planning, social care and key building and construction trades. Another example is that of Microsoft, with their local presence, offering digital skills development opportunities in local communities.

The council has been successful in securing £20m in ‘Levelling Up’ funding for the transformation of the site of the former civic centre, which includes the creation of a new civic library and provides the opportunity for additional housing. Efforts continue to develop the Minster Quarter, with a number of bids received from development partners and an ambition to deliver the changes by 2030. The Hexagon Theatre is undergoing changes too, with the creation of a new performance space and development of a broader cultural and live music offer. The challenges for the council around all of this are the relatively short timescales for delivery and securing the necessary expert capacity to drive and deliver the projects.

## Tackling Inequalities

The corporate peer challenge report encouraged the council to:

- Capitalise fully upon the ‘window of opportunity’ that currently exists to enable fundamental and profound change in the lives of the residents of the borough

The emphasis here was on developing a politically determined narrative and vision around ‘tackling inequalities’; bringing about a much deeper engagement with, and understanding of, Reading’s diverse communities; and establishing a shared understanding and shared endeavour across partners and Reading’s communities in tackling inequalities.

The council refreshed its Corporate Plan in March this year, with this re-emphasising the vision “to help Reading realise its potential and to ensure that everyone who lives and works here can share in the benefits of its success”. Policy Committee two months earlier agreed a ‘Tackling Inequality Strategy’ for the borough, the development of which was overseen by a Social Inclusion Board that the council has established and features a degree of partner representation.

The council outlined that the Tackling Inequalities Strategy has led to the creation of two pilots, each with a multi-disciplinary team, led by an Executive Director and focused on a ward identified as having the greatest level of ‘need’. These pilots, planned to run for two years, aim to develop approaches tailored to the locality, focused on skills, education and training, to bring about fundamental and sustainable change. This is supplemented with a commitment to investing in the environment and community infrastructure, such as the reinvigoration of community centres; the enhancement of open spaces; and the tackling of anti-social behaviour.

The council explained during the progress review session that an evidence-based approach was adopted in order to identify the most appropriate localities for the pilots, drawing on data around jobs, skills, employability etc. The pilots are seeking to place an emphasis on co-production, with the involvement of ward councillors and people active within their communities seen to be integral. Interesting learning has already emerged, for example around a desire from within one of the communities to see investment in parent and child reading groups and the provision of books rather than wider early years education.

The Tackling Inequality Strategy has also led to the appointment of a partnership manager. A key aspect of this role is enhancing communication and engagement between the council and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and a Compact is currently being co-created. The Leader and Chief Executive are now meeting regularly with the infrastructure body that exists to support the VCS in Reading.

The Chief Executive explained that a key and growing consideration on the part of the council in recent months has been how to secure greater social value and benefits for local communities through the way it and other major organisations in the borough work. This has seen an emphasis placed in the council on developing work

experience and mentoring opportunities for young people across Reading and apprenticeship recruitment targeted on the least affluent areas of the borough. The peer team asked during the progress review whether an emphasis was also being placed here on young people within, or leaving, the council's care. The council responded by explaining it had recently commissioned work by the Department for Education looking at its approach to care leavers. The findings from this are expected shortly and it is believed the work has identified a number of interesting areas of potential development including creating internships.

The council outlined that the cost-of-living crisis has seen it respond in a variety of different ways, including significant work having gone into debt advice for council house tenants – with a particular focus on rent payments; free meals being provided for children in various parts of the borough during the Easter holidays; and work with the voluntary and community sector around the provision of food banks and warm hubs. In setting the budget recently, the council extended the duration of its council tax support arrangements and both the Household Support Fund and Holiday Activities Fund.

## Constitution and Governance Revisions

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the council:

- Expedite the work reviewing the Constitution and Delegations Register and, in the process, ensure the opportunity is provided for key internal stakeholders to input fully
- Develop understanding of, and challenge, the factors that generate the lengthy lead-in times and extensive number of 'hoops to jump through' in the council's governance processes

The council explained during the progress review that, in recent months, it has established a 'Key Decisions' set of criteria which has replaced what previously existed in the form of the Delegations Register. There now exists a broad system of delegations, with the criteria informing what needs to be considered at Committee and what can be determined and progressed by officers. Related training has been provided and new templates and processes for delegated decisions have been

developed. The new arrangements are still in their infancy and pragmatism is bearing out. For example, there is scope still to take things to Committee that aren't necessitated by the criteria but which it is pertinent to do so, whilst officers are mindful of the importance of using Lead Councillor Briefing sessions to keep elected members informed of things they are progressing.

A formal review of the revised arrangements and approach is planned but the council indicated that the anecdotal evidence to date is that people are welcoming of the changes and the direction that has been taken. The leadership explained that lots of learning is taking place and things are running fairly smoothly. Where people are requiring extra support and signposting, this is being provided. The leadership's view is that the organisation is now swifter in its decision-making and that the changes to the Constitution are helping to develop the desired organisational culture.

The corporate peer challenge recommended that a comprehensive elected member development programme be established to support councillors in all of their different roles and ensure they are fully aware of their statutory responsibilities. During the progress review, the council outlined that it has increased the amount of elected member training since the corporate peer challenge. An induction programme has also been developed for the period following the elections in May. The council explained that it will be important to guide councillors on what they attend, for example ensuring that the vital nature of corporate parenting training is understood.

The changes at the Constitutional level have been supplemented with other, more informal, revisions to the way the organisation works. This is in line with the corporate peer challenge recommendation that the council adopt a revised managerial approach which maintains the necessary organisational disciplines but also provides for greater autonomy. Examples of the changes that have been made include a move away from recruitment to vacant posts having to be authorised at the senior-most managerial level and discretion being given to Executive Directors to determine what flows from their directorates to Corporate Management Team. The council explained that the annual appraisal process has been streamlined; work is taking place to develop a new suite of performance data to provide a more holistic and insightful reporting system; and the council's approach to project management and business planning are set to be reviewed.



Much of what has been outlined above links to a desired cultural shift within the organisation, centred upon empowering staff and developing the organisational risk appetite. It is recognised that this shift will take time but the sense of those involved in the progress review on the part of the council is that there are early signs of promise.

## Finance

With the progress review coinciding with the final day of the financial year, the indications were that the council was on track to deliver on budget in 2022/23. The council indicated that a balanced budget has been set for the new financial year without the need to call on reserves. The leadership also explained that the budget for the year that follows (2024/25) has been provisionally balanced, albeit with a need for some of the assumptions that have been applied here to be revisited, such as the pay award.

The council's Financial Regulations are currently being re-written. This work is being approached from the perspective of looking to support the desired cultural shifts in the organisation, in the same way as has been seen with the wider Constitutional changes.

The council is optimistic that the 2019/20 accounts will soon be issued and without any qualifications. A myriad of factors, few of which have been unique to Reading, have contributed to the delays that have occurred – which have long been a frustration and disappointment for the council. The council sees having these accounts signed off as representing a huge step forward.

The council's capital investment continues, focused on local priorities such as leisure centres and playgrounds. A Capital Programme Board has recently been established, with a view to developing greater oversight and rigour that will support the effective delivery of the capital programme to both time and budget. Essentially the council is seeking to move away from the need to re-profile the capital programme at regular intervals. An 'Expression of Interest' stage has been established, to enable discussion of thinking on potential new capital projects at an early stage and encourage people looking to bring forward projects to be realistic about deliverability and timescales. To aid the delivery of existing projects where

challenges are being faced, reserves are being made available to enable teams to develop the necessary capacity.

## **Brighter Futures for Children**

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the council ensure that children's services have the opportunity to be engaged much more fundamentally at the strategic level of the organisation. During the progress review, the council's leadership highlighted that there is now much greater visibility of senior figures in 'Brighter Futures for Children'. This is being led by the new Executive Director and examples include increased attendance at CMT; Leader's Briefings; the Social Inclusion Board; and a variety of working groups. Helpful and healthy conversations are seen to be taking place and issues are now flowing regularly to CMT meetings to develop greater corporate input and ownership. Examples include items on home to school transport; Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND); and revisions to the Terms of Reference for the Corporate Parenting Panel. The council Leader and Chief Executive are also meeting regularly with the Chair of the 'Brighter Futures for Children' Board.

## **TEAM Reading Values**

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the council continue the work to fully embed the TEAM Reading values of Working Together, Driving Efficiency, Being Ambitious and Making a Difference. During the progress review, the council explained that the values have been made central to the revised annual appraisal process.

The corporate peer challenge identified the approach to equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the organisation being at a low base, with staff feeling they lack a route to feed into the agenda and leadership accountabilities around it not being defined. It was explained during the progress review that an away day of senior managers was dedicated to this theme, including looking at how to embed EDI within the TEAM Reading values. The council's leadership development programme has also been updated to include a stronger focus on EDI.

A staff survey is being planned for later this year and tremendous importance is

being attached to what emerges from this in terms of identifying how the organisation, its culture and its approach are evolving.

## 4. Moving forward and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Reading Borough Council for its engagement in both the corporate peer challenge and the progress review. We recognise that the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will wish to reflect upon the findings and how to utilise them to support the council's improvement journey.

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 Reeves (Senior Regional Adviser – London and the South East) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and her e-mail address is [helen.reeves@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.reeves@local.gov.uk)