


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Stroud District Council

17th January 2023

Feedback





1. Introduction	3
2. Summary of the approach.....	3
3. Progress Review - Feedback.....	6
4. Final thoughts and next steps	9

1. Introduction

Stroud District Council (SDC) undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during March 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 six months after 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 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 SDC for their commitment to sector led improvement. This review was the next step in an ongoing and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

Original Peer Team Recommendations

The peer team feedback report from the Corporate Peer Challenge that took place in March 2022 included the following recommendations:

- **Pace of activity**

Ensure there is sufficient corporate and strategic capacity, focus on reviewing progress to date and plan effectively for the delivery of agreed plans and strategies. Focus on the delivery of what you have agreed are your priorities to ensure that what you do is done well and your activity is outcome driven.

- **Capacity of senior leadership team**

Consider the structure in place for informal meetings now that key Plans are in place – are meetings proportionate? Consider the capacity of your senior leadership team so that they can continue to deliver for you as they have been doing very capably.

- **Create a Member Development Group**

Create a Member Development Group to coordinate and prioritise a programme of ongoing member training and support new members to find their place in the council and understand and embrace the member officer protocol. If Members own this agenda, they can shape it to what they need.

- **Clarity on embedding the One Council ethos**

Ensure there is a coherent plan that sets out how the One Council ethos will be embedded across the whole council (officers and members). This includes officers working across departments and it includes officers and members displaying corporate loyalty and mutual respect to each other.

- **Action plan for improvement to housing services**

Continue to work on your action plan for improvement for housing services making sure the teams within that service understand their corporate responsibilities and feel that they are an integral part of the council. Ensure a clear plan to put tenants at the heart of what they do.

- **Opportunity to reset Customer Services**

Customer Services - there is an opportunity to reset your approach, making it more efficient, corporate, and centralised. If Customer services (or Community contact) is carried out to its highest level, you can free up resource by answering and responding to queries at first point of contact. Good customer service leads to a highly regarded council.

- **Align the council Plans and Strategies**

As the council's FFF Programme is rolled out, ensure it aligns with the Council Plan, 2030 Strategy and MTFP and there is a clear internal communications plan, alongside the Community Engagement Plan.

The Community Engagement Plan could include expected outcomes agreed with communities. There is clearly work done on external communications and engagement with the media. Ensure that there is also attention paid to internal communications with a communications strategy to ensure that resources are appropriately assigned to both aspects.

- **Working with town and parish councils**

Consider working more effectively with town and parish councils to maximise the developing relationships – whilst developing the Working Together project to put a protocol in place for engagement, continue and enhance the regular forums that are in place already (for example they could be theme based e.g., how towns and parishes can engage in planning policy, or planning consultations and see the results of their engagement).

Timing, approach, and peer team

The progress review at Stroud District Council took place on 17th January 2023.

It was clear from the action plan provided to the peer team (previously presented to SDC Strategy and Resources Committee on 24 November 2022), and the position statement for the progress review, that progress has been made against every recommendation from the corporate peer challenge feedback report. The peer team selected four areas they felt appropriate for a deeper dive as their focus for the progress review. The following section sets out the peer team comments and conclusions.

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

- Katherine Marriott – Chief Executive, Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Tom Beattie – previous Leader, Corby Borough Council
- Paul Clarke – Principal Advisor, SW Local Government Association
- Kathryn Trant, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

To undertake the review, the peer team spent a day at Stroud District Council. As part of this they met with the senior leadership team, attended a focus group of councillors, a focus group of staff and spent time touring the district and some of the major sites and areas of significance.

The progress review ended with the peer team presenting their initial findings to a meeting of political Alliance leaders and the senior leadership team, which led to a wide ranging and very positive conversation about the significant progress to date and challenges ahead.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

SDC has made significant progress in a number of areas since the peer team visited in March 2022. As referenced above, the peer team were shown a number of projects that the council is involved during the peer visit that clearly demonstrated the council's ambition for place. Some of the projects are longer term and complex with strategic delivery partners involved. The role of the council will be critical going forward to make things happen.

From that site visit the peer team reflected that Stroud is in many ways a unique place with a strong industrial heritage, but with a real focus on the future and ensuring both the development but also sustainability of the district. This shines through both in the value base of the council and indeed its communities and the stakeholders we met with. The peer team found that what underpins all of this is strong partnerships between the council and its communities and both staff and council members who are real advocates for the council and the district.

The peer team focused on the following four areas for discussion.

Working with town and parish councils

Prior to being on site for the progress review, members of the peer team met with a focus group of town and parish councils to assess progress against the actions taken related to working with town and parish councils. Feedback from those who attended the focus group was positive, the district council was credited for driving forward the work with town and parish councils and the work developing the town and parish charter was singled out for praise. There was recognition from town and parish council stakeholders of the council taking a reciprocal rather than top down approach.

There was one suggestion to ensure contact lists were updated so that invites to events and meetings went to the right people and a further suggestion to consider direct contact numbers being available for some officers. These were just suggestions to improve the relationship; overall people feel that concerns have been taken seriously and there has been a genuine improvement in the relationship between SDC and town and parish councils.


Although the town and parish council focus group held in advance of the progress review was not as widely attended as we might hope, nevertheless there was positive engagement. Lack of some town and parish council representation at events was reported to the peer team as a frustration for those who do engage, and no doubt for SDC too. We discussed what more the council could do to encourage wider attendance at such events, such as using your ward councillors to trial and promote events, perhaps run an event during the day and evening as many councillors have daytime commitments and finally using publicity after the event, using quotes from attendees, and perhaps making presentations available. Those who do attend will be your best advocates and we encourage the council to persist with its very positive actions.

Create a Member Development Group

As part of the progress review, a focus group was held which members were invited to attend. Whilst attendance was low it was cross party, and there was general consensus that members saw themselves as members of the council representing the people of Stroud rather than wearing party political hats.

The political Alliance continues to work as an effective leadership model and whilst there have been some changes since the peer team last visited, those changes have not affected the ability of SDC to carry out its responsibilities for the people of Stroud. Alliance leaders and the chief executive should be credited for this.

The focus group spoke very positively about the Member Development Group which met for the first time in September 2022. The importance of making the distinction between training and development and understanding that councillors are not staff and therefore the same training for both may not be appropriate is understood.



The group reflected real enthusiasm for the opportunity to take ownership of the member development programme. The peer team felt that this also reflected positively on member officer relationships at SDC; councillors were very complimentary about the calibre of staff working for the council.

Action Plan for improvement to Housing Services

The action plan and position statement both evidence the significant work that has taken place within Housing Services. At a staff focus group held as part of the progress review there was positive feedback that things have been put in place and improvements made. However, it was also clear that housing staff are working in a particularly challenging environment. Many of those challenges are external such as housing asylum seekers, Ukrainian refugees, pressure following the recent publicity regarding addressing damp and mould in rented properties, and the cost of living crisis. There are unsurprisingly challenges around recruitment; perhaps a benchmarking exercise would be helpful to ensure the council is making the right offer to staff.

The peer team heard from staff about ideas for improvements, how working with neighbourhood wardens was going well, an example of working well with members on anti-social behaviour issues, recognition of wanting to change the working pattern to spend more time out on the patch and looking at the repairs and responsiveness side to see if improvements could be made to that model.

The peer team felt there was a willingness amongst staff who want to do the right thing, and it was clear they were now a team looking forward with positivity; this bodes well for the future. .

Clarity on embedding the One Council ethos

In both the member and officer focus groups held as part of the progress review there was positive feedback about the One Council ethos. A lot of work has taken place on the organisation values and behaviours but there was a recognition by all that things don't change overnight.

Importantly, Staff reflected to the peer team that they can see the values being lived out by the senior leadership team. As referenced earlier, the positive working relationships between members and officers is further evidence of that One Council ethos becoming embedded.

Like many councils, SDC is facing challenges of capacity and resilience and coping with external pressures. Despite all of this SDC continues to improve and it is very clear that this is becoming an underpinning strength of the council's core culture. There is an overwhelming sense from those that the peer team spoke to of working for an organisation that does not just care about staff but wants staff to care about each other. The peer team heard that SDC has its heart in the right place, it has staff who want to work for an organisation that cares, that has a sense of purpose and is doing the right thing, a good employer and provider of services for the right reasons.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Stroud 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) paul.clarke@local.gov.uk .