

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Royal Borough of Greenwich

14th and 15th March 2024

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during the summer of 2023 and published the full report on 7th December 2023, followed by a related action plan on 21st February 2024.

A Progress Review is an integral part of the corporate peer challenge process. Taking place and being reported on within 12 months of 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 peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were onsite, including any further support needs
- Discuss the early impact and learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank Greenwich 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 in Greenwich took place across the course of Thursday 14th and Friday 15th March 2024. It had a primary focus on the following recommendations from the original corporate peer challenge:

- Urgently address ways of working and arrangements in Greenwich in order to aid decision-making; maximise the effectiveness of joint working between elected members and officers at the senior level; support councillors and political groups appropriately and effectively; aid the work of Cabinet; facilitate

collective responsibility politically and corporately; and enhance involvement and engagement amongst elected members.

- Develop increased visibility of the senior managerial leadership; reinvigorate management forums at different levels and use them to help shape and drive the organisation; and enable greater staff awareness and engagement generally.
- Establish greater rigour in the council's financial planning and management in order to manage the risks that we see emerging for the council financially and maximise the opportunities available to invest in council priorities.

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

- Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Haringey
- Councillor Grace Williams, Leader, London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Doug Wilkinson, Director of Environment and Street Scene, London Borough of Enfield
- Camilla Mankabady, Director of Communications, Liverpool City Council
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

They were joined, with the council's kind agreement, by Jacqueline Gray, Corporate Peer Challenge Lead at Bedford Borough Council, in a shadowing capacity.

The peer team met around 80 people within the council over the course of their time on site.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

There has been a marked and positive change to the council's budget-setting approach in recent months, compared to previous years. This has seen enhanced collaboration and engagement across the organisation. Middle managers reflected that they had experienced a more involving and holistic approach than before. An

example is the joint working across a number of services and functions looking at approaches to reducing costs for the most expensive children's social care placements. The whole process was also felt to have moved at a greater pace than in the past.

The generation of savings ideas from within services and Directorates, against allocated percentage budget reduction targets, saw 118 proposals totalling nearly £40m being considered in a series of 'Star Chambers'. Each of these sessions involved the Leader; the Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Social Value; the Chief Executive; and S151 Officer, with them being joined by the respective Portfolio Holder and Director for the Directorate under consideration. This then informed the proposals collectively considered by the Cabinet and Greenwich Management Team (GMT). The process also saw discussion around structural deficits in the budget that it was agreed would be addressed, including in adult social care, children's social care and temporary accommodation. A key principle at the heart of the process was empowering Cabinet members in the leadership of their Portfolios. Those Portfolio Holders we spoke to indicated they felt able to see the 'whole picture' of the budget this year, compared to only the elements related to their immediate areas of responsibility previously, and welcomed the early sight they had of proposals and the chance to steer and shape the priorities and direction.

The Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), comprising the members of the Cabinet and GMT, has been formed since the corporate peer challenge. This is a direct response to the recommendation to urgently address ways of working and arrangements in Greenwich in order to aid decision-making; maximise the effectiveness of joint working between elected members and officers at the senior level; aid the work of Cabinet; and facilitate collective responsibility politically and corporately. The primary focus of this forum to date has been the budget-setting for 2024/25. Our discussions identified that participation in SLT has been a positive experience for those involved, albeit the budget process has been demanding and all-consuming. The forum has served to supplement the bilateral relationships between individual Cabinet members and GMT members that have traditionally been the primary form of engagement at those levels.

The formation of SLT and the time and effort dedicated to it is part of a wider picture of investment in leadership at the senior-most levels. This includes the undertaking by SLT members of the 'Facet5 Personality Profile' which has helped to explore similarities and differences in motivations, attitudes and behaviour across the individuals at that level, helping to develop insight and understanding within the collective. Another example of investing in the senior leadership is the elected member peer support that has been sourced to help enhance the way the majority Group on the council functions and the wider elected membership is engaged. A further example is the participation by the Leader and Deputy Chief Executive in corporate peer challenges of other councils in recent months, with the learning and insights this has provided for Greenwich.

People reflected positively around what these types of development have delivered in relation to the approach of Cabinet members and the way the GMT operates. This includes enhanced relationships and more joint consideration of key issues, including the budget. Portfolio Holders are seen to be engaging the wider elected membership more willingly and effectively. People also reflected that Cabinet members are now leading on the presentation of items at Group meetings – leading to a move away from GMT members regularly attending that forum, as we encouraged in the corporate peer challenge report. The intention is that Portfolio Holders will move shortly to leading on the presentation of reports at Cabinet meetings too.

It is important that such investment in the development of leadership in the council continues. We see merit in the extension of the elected member peer support for the majority Group and for this to be supplemented with elected member mentoring for individual Cabinet members. We would also encourage the extension of participation from those at the SLT level in peer challenge activity both to aid personal development and draw learning and fresh insights into Greenwich. Looking more widely, the council's action plan responding to the corporate peer challenge recommendations outlines a review of, and an enhanced focus on, elected member development in the Spring of this year, including a survey running through March and April exploring people's training and development needs. What is put in place would helpfully significantly supplement the statutory training provision, linked to quasi-judicial committees, which has traditionally been the focus in Greenwich. This would

build on what was recently made available in relation to training on council finances and the budget.

In a context of the many talented officers we have met at a range of levels in the organisation during our time in Greenwich, we would encourage the council to extend investment in leadership development to the Corporate Senior Leadership Group (CSLG) level and beyond. This is important in developing more distributed leadership in the organisation. Managers we spoke to at the middle tiers highlighted their desire and willingness to be more engaged in the collective development of solutions to the challenges the council and the borough are facing. CSLG (which comprises GMT and Assistant Directors) meetings in recent months have inevitably been dominated by the budget. However, a session in the last few weeks, led by the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Digital and Access and focusing on matters of well-being and 'being able to bring your whole self to work', was seen as having been hugely stimulating and fulfilling. People are keen to build on this type of session, providing the opportunity to 'take a step back'; focus on their progression and development both individually and collectively, including thinking about leadership styles in the organisation and developing resilience; and consider the requirements of their role leading and supporting often large teams of people across the council.

The scale of the budget savings agreed for 2024/25 is the most significant the council has faced. Based on our discussions with officers at a range of levels, there is clear commitment and willingness around delivering them. However, the detail of budgets is only emerging now and the scale, complexity and sensitivity of what needs to be achieved is becoming clear, including to residents. When the overall budget package agreed at Full Council starts to break down into individual elements such as revisions to school crossing patrols, libraries and children's centres, things become much more tangible. There is still much to be done, including undertaking the related consultation activity, and potentially significant challenges to be overcome in order to see the agreed savings delivered.

There was no defensiveness on the part of the managers that we spoke to regarding delivering the savings but there is anxiety. Included within this is consideration of the

demands that will be placed upon the council's corporate capacity, across functions such as legal, finance, HR and communications, in supporting services and Directorates deliver what is required to realise the savings. This concern is echoed by those leading such functions in the corporate centre, given the constraints they face.

Delivering the budget savings represents one of the key areas of risk for the council and it is vital that the risks are fully understood and effectively managed. Already, given timescales and the time of year, there is a challenge around the realisation of a 'full year effect' on savings for 2024/25. The effective tracking of progress in the delivery of savings is a key part of managing the risks around them, providing an 'early warning' of where things may be going 'off track'. It is positive that a Programme Management Office (PMO) is being established for this purpose – although it is important that people are clear that the responsibility of the PMO relates to monitoring, and not delivering, the savings. The council's Financial Management Board, which includes the Leader; the Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Social Value; the Chief Executive; and S151 Officer has a role going forward in navigating the risks around the budget and savings but it is recognised that the remit and functioning of this body requires refinement in order to fulfil that role.

The council is committed to drawing out the learning from the budget-setting process of recent months. From our discussions, it is clear that this idea is supported. The process this year has felt to people to be more planned, constructive and collaborative than has previously been the case but is seen to be able to evolve further. In our discussions there was reference as to how "rapid" the whole process has felt, with a desire to have time in the future to consider more cross-cutting and strategic approaches to addressing the financial challenge. As part of this, there would be merit in looking to maximise the link between the budget and the 'Our Greenwich' Corporate Plan and develop more in the way of a corporate (relative to what takes place in individual Directorates) transformation programme.

The council is seeking to achieve a shift in relation to accountability for budgets, empowering and enabling managers and emphasising the responsibility that sits with Portfolio Holders. Traditionally, responsibility for budget management in Greenwich

is seen to have sat with the finance function. Expectations here are changing and the means are being developed to provide managers with something closer to 'real time' budget information. The expectation is that they will utilise this to help them with forecasting which, in turn, positions them to develop corrective actions at the outset of budgetary issues.

With the Strategic Leadership Team having been established, there needs to be clarity around its wider purpose going forward and how this is driven. Recent weeks have, as we have outlined, seen the focus start to extend beyond the budget. The activity with the 'Facet5 Personality Profile' was a first step into broader territory and this should be built upon. There was also discussion at a meeting in early March exploring the respective remits of Informal Political Cabinet, SLT, 'Our Greenwich' Steering Groups and bilateral meetings between Cabinet and SLT members.

The real value of a forum like SLT lies in the space and time it creates for a council's senior political and managerial leadership to liaise collectively and informally over key strategic issues facing the place it serves and the organisation. 'Horizon scanning' and early political input on emerging issues is key to a council being as much on the 'front foot' as possible and helping the formal decision-making process run smoothly. We see merit in the development of a broad outline work programme of items for discussion at SLT, looking many months ahead and jointly contributed to and owned by Cabinet and GMT. Central to it would be the matters likely to form Key Decisions required by the council in the months and years ahead. A schedule of regular SLT meetings, with a frequency to be jointly determined, should be developed and the expectations regarding the style of them and the approach – aimed at maximising informal discussion, thinking and planning – should be mapped out.

This forms part of a picture of collectively determining, across Cabinet and GMT, how the senior leadership teams work together going forward and the related mutual expectations and needs. As an example, we heard some Cabinet members expressing their desire to see greater pace in the council's delivery. They highlighted positively the speed with which the council had moved to purchase three local tower blocks in just two months in order to help with the challenges around temporary accommodation provision and costs. Being so 'fleet of foot' and moving so swiftly

was something that Cabinet members indicated they would like to see more of from the council. This is a complex matter that requires discussion so that it is fully 'unpacked' and expectations and understanding are shared.

The joint working between the Leader and Chief Executive is central to the matter of how Cabinet and GMT function together. There were reflections during our discussions that this crucial relationship needs to evolve further to become fully effective and deliver what the wider organisation requires. This requires the investment of the necessary time and dialogue to both develop the relationship and shape direction and approaches on key issues facing the council.

The council should consider what external support would be helpful in the space of continuing the development of relationships and ways of working at Cabinet and GMT level. Such matters are not always straightforward and having input from elsewhere, and the experience and perspectives this provides, can be tremendously beneficial.

Progress has been made in recent months in the reinvigoration or establishment of staff forums. This is in a context of the corporate peer challenge recommendation relating to developing increased visibility of the senior managerial leadership; reinvigorating management forums at different levels and using them to help shape and drive the organisation; and enabling greater staff awareness and engagement generally. Developments include the creation of the 'Leaders Forum' for Service Managers, Heads of Service, Assistant Directors and GMT members and the undertaking of 'Ask the Leadership' sessions, which are open to all staff. There have been one and two meetings of these forums respectively since the corporate peer challenge. Thus, things feel very much in their infancy in this space and frontline staff that we met highlighted that they felt the visibility of the council's managerial leadership was still very limited.

The council has commissioned a staff survey, which is being undertaken currently, and this is a positive development. A series of staff forums helped to shape the questions, which includes a focus on organisational ways of working,

communications and facilities for staff. How the staff survey findings are shared and responded to represents a key test of the senior managerial leadership of the organisation. The frontline staff that we spoke to indicated the importance they were attaching to the results being communicated quickly and openly. They are seeking an honesty from the council's leadership over what emerges and emphasised they aren't looking for GMT to have all the answers. Rather, they welcome the discussions that can usefully be held on the back of the findings and the way that this provides an opportunity for them to input and assist.

The council has established an action plan in response to the corporate peer challenge recommendations which perfectly appropriately sees some aspects prioritised over others in a context of the multiplicity of demands facing the organisation. An example of this is the move to explore the area of elected member training and development provision now rather than before, when budget-setting was dominating. Another example would be planning to embark upon the development of a place vision for Greenwich in the summer of this year rather than at an earlier point.

We see merit in taking the opportunity now to take stock of the prioritisation and timescales of the corporate peer challenge action plan. In doing so, the council should ensure all elected members are engaged in the process, including the political Opposition. This is important given the action plan relates to key aspects of how the organisation functions, with elected members central to this.

Based on our discussions, the approach to the management of elected member casework should be prioritised within the action plan. We understand there is a review of the casework process taking place and a joint elected member and officer working group overseeing this and the way forward. The approach to casework is clearly the source of a degree of frustration and tension and therefore proposals that will deliver the necessary changes and improvements would ideally emerge soon. The same applies to the council's approach to communications and community engagement. The ambitions and expectations around what needs to be delivered here need to be fully explored across SLT, with input from the communications function, and then addressed in order to avoid this becoming an increased source of tension and frustration within the senior political and managerial leadership.


Significant change is taking place in relation to Overview and Scrutiny, as agreed at Full Council in February. As well as structural change, a new cohort of Chairs will be in place following Annual Council in May. It is important that the new arrangements, and the individuals central to them, are supported to ensure positive impact in this key element of the council's governance structure. As part of this, we would see merit in the Overview and Scrutiny work programme being devised in a context of the ambitions of 'Our Greenwich'.

In summary, it is clear that there have been significant and positive changes in recent months in some of the key relationships in the organisation, specifically at the Cabinet and GMT level. There has also been progress in the way important aspects of the organisation function, including the budget-setting process. The areas that have seen progress still contain risks that need to be effectively managed. This includes the challenge of operationalising things effectively, such as delivering the budget savings; establishing greater budgetary responsibility on the part of managers; embedding management and staff forums at a range of levels; communicating the findings from, and responding to, the staff survey; and developing and delivering the next iteration of the corporate peer challenge action plan.

There is clearly constrained organisational capacity. In that context, the ambitions and priorities of the political and managerial leadership need to be aligned and expectations need to be reflective of that. Achieving this forms a key part of the on-going dialogue required across SLT. Also, we heard how long it is since several people at senior levels have had an effective break. The organisation needs to be mindful of issues of resilience and well-being and the importance of people being kind to themselves and to one another.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA and the peer team would like to thank the Royal Borough of Greenwich for undertaking the Progress Review. We appreciate that the senior managerial and political leadership will wish to reflect on the findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation can best 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.

Kate Herbert (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and she can be reached via the following e-mail address – kate.herbert@local.gov.uk