

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Gloucestershire County Council

15th and 16th January 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in November 2023 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

A Progress Review is an integral part of the corporate peer challenge process and is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's related action plan
- Consider 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 the early impact and learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank Gloucestershire County Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. The 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 Gloucestershire County Council took place on 15th and 16th January 2025. It focused on the recommendations from the corporate peer challenge as follows:

- Build on the council's strategic leadership role to work with partners to shape the evolution of a refreshed vision for growth in Gloucestershire
- Prioritise the continued investment in IT as an enabler to the council's operations and make its improvement a demonstrable and equal part of the council's overall transformation portfolio, with associated funding, expertise and leadership
- Ensure the equalities, diversity and inclusion agenda is 'lived and breathed' by the entire cohort of leaders

- Enable greater collective corporate leadership and the development of cross-organisational dialogue, understanding and approaches
- Demonstrate to people within the organisation that they are being heard and responded to
- Enable a greater focus on prioritised outcomes for communities through the more effective use of cross-cutting data and intelligence

The following peers were involved in the Progress Review:

- Meredith Teasdale, Director of Children's Services, Sheffield City Council
- Councillor Keith Glazier, Leader, East Sussex County Council (Conservative)
- Councillor Sarah Butikofer, North Norfolk District Council (Liberal Democrat)
- Angela Jones, Director of Thriving Places, Westmorland and Furness Council
- Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South-West, LGA
- Paul Britton, on secondment to the LGA from Homes England and leading on the One Public Estate programme in the South-West
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The council has clearly embraced the recommendations from the corporate peer challenge in November 2023 and delivered change and improvement in a range of areas in response. What has been achieved is impressive.

Transitions in Leadership

In recent months, change has been taking place at the senior leadership levels of the organisation both politically and managerially. This follows an extensive period, across more than a decade, of significant stability at that level. Such change is being navigated in a planned and smooth way.

There was a well-managed transition to a new Leader, plus wider changes at the Cabinet level, which took effect in September of last year. A refreshed set of political priorities has emerged following these changes. These priorities have a high profile and are well understood amongst those people that we met from different levels in the organisation. There is a set of externally facing priorities (“above the line”) alongside a set of more internally focused (“below the line”) ones.

The “above the line” priorities are centred upon highways; enhancing the county’s infrastructure (including motorway junctions and schools) in line with growth ambitions; special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); adult social care; and the needs of rural communities. The “below the line” priorities emphasise an organisation that is data-driven and focused on continuous improvement.

There is also a well-managed transition taking place in relation to the role of Chief Executive, with the recruitment process currently underway and an appointment scheduled to be made in February. This follows recent change at the Deputy Chief Executive level. The new Deputy Chief Executive is seen both internally and externally to have had a very significant and positive impact since her arrival less than a year ago, including establishing and leading a new approach to the development of the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) and budget-setting process; driving forward the organisation’s equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda; and nurturing relationships with district and borough councils and other key partners.

Organisational Leadership and Collaborative Working

Members of the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), comprising the most senior tiers of the managerial leadership, are modelling a positive set of values and behaviours and making their collective contribution count more. This has both been fostered by, and demonstrated through, the new approach to the MTFS. Whilst inevitably having been challenging, what has been experienced with this new approach is viewed very positively, both in terms of the process and the outcomes. It has served to develop greater shared insight, understanding and appreciation, at both Cabinet and CLT level, of the challenges being faced across the organisation and its services. The

approach has increased collaborative working and served to identify opportunities for savings and investment on a more cross-cutting basis.

CLT is also creating the time and space now for more in the way of strategic discussion and developing a greater sense of shared agendas. Dedicated development sessions have helped to establish an increased sense of collective leadership responsibility and insights to one another as individuals, whilst time has also been taken to explore cross-organisational challenges around, and approaches to, the likes of community safety and climate change.

The outcomes from the MTFs and budget-setting process include the council's financial position continuing to be seen as "sound" and the 2025/26 budget being planned to see investment of at least five per cent "across the board".

Strategic Partnership

'Leadership Gloucestershire' has existed for several years and brings together public sector organisations which allocate and spend significant resources in the county. It exists to provide vision, leadership and strategic direction where it is important for such organisations to work together for the communities and businesses of Gloucestershire. It held a 'systems leadership' event in November 2024, which is seen to have inspired and galvanised people across partner organisations.

'Leadership Gloucestershire' has been supplemented by the creation of the Gloucestershire City Region Board and, in August last year, the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Board was formed. This coincided with the winding down of the 'GFirst Local Enterprise Partnership' and the transfer of its responsibilities to the county council. The Economic Growth Board, with broad partnership representation from across both the public and private sectors, has been created to oversee the county's economic development, help attract investment and manage specific projects such as the Gloucestershire Growth Hub network.

Recent months saw the adoption of a refreshed approach and attitude by the county council towards district and borough council partners. The Leader, who in his first few months in the role visited each such council to meet with their Leader and Chief

Executive, has been integral, along with the Deputy Chief Executive, to the efforts to nurture these relationships.

Inevitably, different views and perspectives on the complex issues existing across Gloucestershire have been, and continue to be, held across the seven councils. The recent 'English Devolution White Paper' has seen devolution and local government reorganisation also now land in this space. Despite the inevitable tensions that this has generated, the shared responsibility remains across all the councils in Gloucestershire to maintain a focus on the interests of residents and businesses. An example of this is the development of the Local Growth Plan and the council has a strong intent to deliver a co-production approach to this with district and borough council partners. The initial signs around this process, which is already underway, seem positive. Constructive relationships and good joint working generally exist at the more operational and 'day to day' level across the different councils and this cannot afford to be jeopardised by the current tensions and challenges.

Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion

The EDI agenda has moved forward significantly in the council in recent months, with more visible leadership and ownership from the senior political and managerial levels. The Staff Networks continue to play a key role here, with their endeavour and commitment now supplemented by the facilitation of a climate in the organisation that supports and enables greater dialogue and development activity around EDI matters. Examples of this include discussions at the senior leadership levels around becoming established as an anti-racism organisation and the learning to be drawn from the organisational response – both towards communities and employees – as the potential for civil disturbances emerged across the country last year. Development activity includes modules around EDI within the 'Growing Great Managers' programme and a recent internal Leadership Conference featuring the Staff Networks exploring matters such as neurodiversity. A concerted effort will be required across the council and its senior leadership to continue to drive the EDI agenda forward.

Internal Communications

Internal communications have been enhanced in recent months. A prime example of this is the recent online session, open to all staff, outlining the devolution and local government reorganisation agenda, which is moving at pace and inevitably generating uncertainty for people. Around 1,500 council officers joined the session and, amongst those staff that we spoke with, there is a strong desire to see this initiative translate into a programme of such sessions exploring key issues. People at different levels reflected the event as demonstrating a desire from the council's leadership to establish a more proactive approach to the communication and management of change.

The council's 'Employee Voice Groups' have been re-invigorated as a means of engaging and involving staff more. Staff that we met demonstrated real commitment to change and improvement. There is an opportunity for the council to harness this and engage them more to help drive further improvement. One example, which staff themselves highlighted, would be helping to inform a review of the Personal Development and Review (PDR) process.

Efforts by the political and managerial leadership to demonstrate a greater valuing and appreciation of staff have also been seen, including the re-introduction of the 'Employee Achievement Awards'. These have been well received. Staff also appreciate the efforts that the Leader has been making to visit or meet with staff in different service areas and functions as he seeks to develop his knowledge and understanding of the council.

The council undertakes an annual staff survey, supplemented by regular 'pulse surveys', as it seeks to understand the way people are feeling and how they are experiencing the organisation, their work and the operating environment. The last annual survey identified Heads of Service as a particularly pressurised group in the organisation. Further work has been taking place to understand the drivers behind this and the council is now embarking upon providing a range of related support arrangements and development activities for this tier of staff.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

The challenges and issues previously being experienced around the reliability and resilience of ICT have been effectively addressed, hugely benefiting staff. The data and digital agenda in the council has also developed real drive now, reflected in the adoption of a 'Data and Intelligence Strategy' in September and the newly established Transformation Portfolio at Cabinet level. There is optimism that the 'One Programme' transition to the SAP software system, which is a very major undertaking for any organisation, will run smoothly.

The opportunities around ICT now take the form of:

- Ensuring users across the organisation are trained and supported appropriately in order that the investment that has been made in technology is capitalised upon
- Moving to a position in which directorates and corporate ICT leads co-produce a 'roadmap' of future developments and investment, in order to ensure emerging needs and digital potential are understood and delivered on in the most effective ways.

Transformation and Improvement

It was the view of the peer team upon our return that it remains difficult to distinguish between 'transformation', 'improvement' and 'business as usual' activity in the organisation. As an example, 'Transformation Boards' have been in place over recent years to oversee what have essentially been the 'improvement agendas' in areas such as children's services and Fire and Rescue. These terms of 'transformation' and 'improvement' seem to be largely interchangeable within the organisation and, in turn, overlap to a degree with the 'day to day' of enhancing service delivery. The challenge of distinguishing between these elements continues to impact upon some corporate support functions in terms of understanding and prioritising the demands that exist for their time and other resources, relative to what directorates can take forward from themselves.

A board is being established to provide oversight at the Executive level of the

'transformation' agenda. This provides a potential opportunity to refine the wider set of governance arrangements that exist around 'transformation' and 'improvement' in the council, founded upon a clear and shared understanding of what those terms entail and ensuring the focus at that Executive level is on what is of the greatest significance.

Governance

The re-visiting of aspects of the councillor induction programme from 2021 has been welcomed. That induction took place during the pandemic and was therefore undertaken remotely. Elected members have particularly valued the sessions that have been run recently to enhance their familiarisation with Shire Hall and the 'marketplace' activity that enabled them to meet people across the senior managerial leadership of the council.

Overview and Scrutiny remains an area of the council's governance with significant scope for development. The creation of the Scrutiny Chairs Forum, aimed at enhancing the work programming of the committees and co-ordinating activity between them, is a positive step but needs to be embedded and see increased participation and engagement. The intended wider review of Overview and Scrutiny needs to take place and we recommend that this is both externally facilitated and undertaken in such a way as to enable and secure input and engagement across all stakeholders.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Gloucestershire County Council for undertaking the Progress Review.

We appreciate that the 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

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Local Government Association company number 11177145 Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government company number 03675577

Chair: Councillor Louise Gittins

Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

President: Baroness Grey-Thompson



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 for the South-West region, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be reached via paul.clarke@local.gov.uk