

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Royal Borough of Windsor and
Maidenhead

20th October 2022

Feedback



1. Introduction	3
2. Summary of the approach.....	3
3. Progress Review - Feedback.....	6
4. Final thoughts and next steps	14

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during January 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 nine 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 the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead for their commitment to sector led improvement. This 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 Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead took place remotely on October 20th 2022 over three hours and additional discussion with the outgoing Chief Executive and leaders of the main opposition parties.

The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

Local Priorities and Outcomes

Recommendation 1: Prioritise embedding the Corporate Plan across the Council and establish a new performance framework which links service plans and priorities to budget and risks over the medium term.

Financial Management

Recommendation 2: Refresh the Medium- Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) with stronger links to the savings made by the Transformation Strategy and underpinned by the creation of a Transformation Fund to deliver the benefits needed. The first priority of the strategy should be to improve the customer experience.

Governance and Culture

- **Recommendation 3:** Establish a Member development programme, including a new induction package for May 2023 which aligns to the strategic priorities of the Royal Borough. Group Leaders need to be fully involved in developing the programme to ensure ongoing member participation, throughout the term of office.
- **Recommendation 4:** Put in place stronger support for member casework that provides consistency and timeliness of response across all council functions. This will help members to carry out their ward work more efficiently and maintain residents' confidence that their issues are being dealt with.
- **Recommendation 5:** Review the current model of scrutiny committees. There are currently 4 scrutiny panels and one health scrutiny panel. It may be better for the committees to be more closely aligned to the priorities in the Corporate Plan and service delivery arrangements covering people, place and corporate functions.
- **Recommendation 6:** Revisit the terms of reference and remit of the joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee for East Berkshire as part of the establishment of the ICS.
- **Recommendation 7:** Review Cabinet portfolios so that they are re-balanced across people, place and corporate functions to enable more capacity to influence at a sub-regional and national level alongside local place leadership responsibilities.
- **Recommendation 8:** Develop a clear and consistent framework on the role and governance of the arms-length Council entities including Optalis, AFC and the Property Company. Shareholder responsibilities should be separated from those

of the strategic client.

Organisation and Place Leadership

- **Recommendation 9:** Develop a localism strategy with town and parish councils and community groups which promotes greater subsidiarity of decision making and thus enabling RBWM to be more strategic.
- **Recommendation 10:** Take advantage of the 25th anniversary of being a unitary council to work with the Youth Council and partners to set out a new 25-year vision for the Royal Borough.
- **Recommendation 11:** Once the improvement plan for the Planning function is in place and beginning to have an impact, consider a peer review of the Planning Service to drive continuous improvement in 2023/24 and beyond

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

- Kate Kennally – Lead Peer
- Councillor David Renard – Member Peer
- Tim Ryder – Officer Peer
- Gill Elliott - Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met virtually via MS Teams over the course of 3 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Councillor Andrew Johnson – Leader of the Council
- Councillor Samantha Rayner – Deputy Leader of the Council
- Adele Taylor - Executive Director of Resources
- Emma Duncan - Monitoring Officer and Director of Governance, Law, Strategy & Public Health
- Kevin McDaniel - Executive Director of People Services
- Andrew Durrant - Executive Director of Place Services

- Rebecca Hatch - Head of Strategy

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The peer team was pleased to see evidence of good progress against all the corporate peer challenge recommendations. We noted that overall, there was a greater feeling of confidence in the Council to take decisions. In particular, the decision to accept the peer team's recommendation that the portfolio of Children, Adults and Public Health should be divided, had taken political bravery. A number of other legacy issues which have been challenging for the Borough have also been addressed since the CPC. These include the redevelopment of the golf course site in Maidenhead and the adoption of the Borough Local Plan. We saw examples of strong place leadership by RBWM in pan Berkshire discussions, positive engagement in investment zones as well as levels of resident trust and satisfaction in the Council that are above LGA benchmarks. The peer team also acknowledged the key role that the Council had played in the funeral of the late Queen Elizabeth II and the considerable burden that this had placed on Council resources. There was evidence that Members' behaviour has improved, with fewer complaints from residents and less problems apparent on social media.

The team's view is that the focus now needs to be on embedding the changes so that they are "hard wired" into the DNA of the Council and lead to demonstrable improvement. This is particularly important in light of the changes at executive officer level. The team were concerned about the realism of some of the financial assumptions underpinning the MTFS, such as the proposed rates of pay under local negotiations. They would urge the Council to continue to link performance, budget and risk through the prism of corporate plan goals with an outcomes-based approach. Other areas for further consideration by the Council are the sustainability of the arrangements for people services following on from the creation of an Executive Director covering People Services during 2022. The Chief Executive with the Executive Director for People Services should undertake a test of assurance on the scope and remit of the joint role covering the DASS and DCS in order to inform the Council's review of its delivering arrangement for children services with Achieving for Children. RBWM currently has an interim Chief executive and will shortly be recruiting for a permanent holder of the post. We suggest that the interim Chief Executive Officer (CEO) could usefully bring new perspectives to the Pan Berkshire work from other Combined Authority areas to support the pan Berkshire work on devolution, helping build on RWBM's proactive leadership in this area. This might in

turn help to attract a new CEO. We feel that it will be important for the Council to keep engaging with the LGA, perhaps having some further bespoke leadership support post elections. This would help to ensure that the changes and progress made around culture are not lost in the future. Post-election there will be a need to restart the work on community governance to maximise opportunities for local devolution of assets and services.

It should also be acknowledged in this review that opposition members were less than positive about the Council's progress on the CPC recommendations. Whilst they see the changes to member committees and training as positive steps they also said that there is more to do on scrutiny, member culture, parish and town councils and the MTFS.

Local Priorities and Outcomes

The CPC's first recommendation was that the Council should prioritise embedding the Corporate Plan across the Council and establishing a new performance framework linking service plans and priorities to budget and risks over the medium term. The Council reported that it has strengthened the alignment between the Corporate Plan and the MTFS with resourcing decisions being linked to the Plan's priorities and objectives and business planning and budget setting being brought more closely together. As an immediate step, it is developing Directorate-level Plans, which include performance, finance and risk and using these as a core document for the 2023-24 budgeting decision process. The Council's 2022 Residents Survey has been undertaken and published. The findings have set the baseline for some of Corporate Plan goals and will provide evidence to inform the annual refresh of Corporate Plan's priorities, as well as wider service and policy design. A new approach to performance management has also been driven forward based on delivery against Corporate Plan priorities. Key achievements reported by the council include:

- Launch of a new Citizens Portal, in April 2022. This shares performance information against all 50 Corporate Plan goals, to enable greater transparency and accountability on the council's performance and progress. The Portal is updated with new data monthly and provides the public facing layer of the new performance framework.
- Corporate Overview & Scrutiny have taken on overarching

responsibility for reviewing council performance – assessing quarterly performance reports on an exception basis.

- A new Performance and Risk Management Board was set up in May, to provide a safe space and increased focus on performance among the senior leadership.
- The new performance approach has been set out clearly in a Performance Management handbook, alongside a capacity building programme which is being initiated with staff.

The peer team recognise that good progress has been made and agree with the Council that there is more to do to align budget and risks with priorities in the context of a constrained economic environment.

Financial Management

The peer team's second recommendation was that the Council should refresh its' Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) with stronger links to the savings made by the Transformation Strategy and underpinned by the creation of a Transformation Fund to deliver the benefits needed. It added that the first priority of the Transformation Strategy should be to improve the customer experience. The Council confirmed that the MTFS had been refreshed and agreed by Council in September 2022. However, due to the significant changes to the economic environment since the CPC in January 2022, the Council's focus was on the immediate issues of inflation, interest rate rises and the need for sound financial management. This was to be achieved by introducing more grip and rigour into budget management processes. The Council confirmed that it still has in year budget pressures with a budget gap but that it expected that these would be successfully managed and there were contingencies in place to achieve this.

The Council reported that it had made good progress on aligning the budget and risks with priorities although there was more to do. The peer team concluded that it was indeed very close to "stitching together" an outcome-based budget, priorities and risks. Further alignment was needed between the finance and performance dashboards and that work needed to be completed in time for the new administration in May 2023. For the Council a key factor of its MTFS going forward would be demand management in key services. Discussions were taking place with Health

colleagues to develop this approach.

We understand that the Transformation service has been restructured to bring corporate transformation into the Resources Directorate, alongside IT, Digital and customer services. The intention is that the recent alignment of these key services together will be able to drive forward customer transformation in a more cohesive way and through the development of a new customer strategy, underpinned by the digital journey. Rather than create a specific and separate transformation fund as recommended by peers, the Council is currently considering through its budget setting process, those areas to invest in that will lead to actions around demand management, the use of technology to improve both efficiency and customer experience with a view to reconsidering the need for a fund over the medium term as the transformation strategy develops. Whatever approach is taken, there must be flexibility to allow an “invest to save” approach where there are clear and measurable service improvements and financial savings to be made.

The peer team were concerned that local pay increases being modelled in next year’s budget were only at 2% compared to national pay negotiations considering around 6%. This could be detrimental to staff recruitment and retention in an already tight employment environment. The Council agreed that it is off the pace on locally negotiated pay. It was meeting the Trade Unions soon to discuss the issue, but the pay award would come down to affordability. The draft budget will model more scenarios e.g. around levels of council tax subject to Government policy on referendum caps.

Governance and Culture

Under this theme the peer team made six recommendations. These covered:

- Establishing a Member development programme, including a new induction package for May 2023 which aligns to the strategic priorities of the Royal Borough.
- Putting in place stronger support for member casework that provides consistency and timeliness of response across all council functions.
- Reviewing the current model of scrutiny committees to make them more closely aligned to the priorities in the Corporate Plan and service delivery arrangements.

- Revisiting the terms of reference and remit of the joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee for East Berkshire as part of the establishment of the ICS.
- Reviewing Cabinet portfolios so that they are re-balanced across people, place and corporate functions to enable more capacity to influence at a sub-regional and national level alongside local place leadership responsibilities.
- Developing a clear and consistent framework on the role and governance of the arms-length Council entities including Optalis, AFC and the Property Company.

The Council confirmed that all the recommendations under this theme had been progressed. Regarding a new Induction process for Members, it had established an officer working group, which had met, to engage with all the Group Leaders in the development of the new Member Induction Programme to follow the elections in May 2023. Funding for this was being considered as part of the budget process for next year. Group Leaders had given a clear steer to include sessions focussed on the culture and values of the Council and to support any new Cabinet Members in the administration. A proposed programme to cover the period following the election was in draft and due to be discussed with Group Leaders later in the year. A continuous development programme should then be drafted to continue throughout the four-year term.

The Council has reviewed how Member queries are dealt with and has restructured the Corporate Teams to allow focus on Member Support through the funding of a caseworker (currently subject of a growth bid for 23/24). This should see an improvement in response times to Member queries. It has also evaluated a number of different software support packages after a trial earlier in the year and will be implementing Caseworker.gov to provide additional support, tracking and oversight which again, should aid Members and the Council in managing queries.

In terms of the Overview and Scrutiny function of the Council, the Panels have been reconstituted in line with the Peer Review recommendations. The Council has also benefited from a bespoke support package offered by the LGA through the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. The first session with Chairs of the Panels has taken place and the next planned is planned for November. The Council acknowledge that this is a work in progress as cultural behaviour was embedded and difficult to change but is determined to keep the focus up in key corporate governance, financial and cross

cutting priority areas such as transformation and equalities. This will be embedded in the improvement journey through a resourced Corporate Improvement Plan to build on the work done through the Peer Review.

After giving considerable thought to the issue the Council had agreed to split the Adults, Public Health and Children's portfolio into two roles. One for Adults and Public Health and one for Children.

The Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee is being reviewed with colleagues in public health to reflect the footprint of the Integrated Care Board (ICB).

The Council said that the role and governance of the arms-length companies will be the subject of work through the Annual Governance Statement this year, to ensure that the governance arrangements are sufficiently robust and transparent.

In terms of the culture of the organisation work is underway to strengthen the approach to equalities, and to embed equalities considerations more effectively across the organisation. A new, more outwards-focused set of equality objectives has been developed and will be incorporated into the refresh of the Corporate Plan in January 2023. Key topics include the cost of living, Early Years and Disability and Accessibility. The approach to Equality Impact assessments (EQIAs) has been strengthened. A new form has been drafted and is currently being piloted in a number of areas. An evidence grid is being drafted to support officers to take a more evidence-based approach to equality considerations. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny will monitor and review the progress on equalities work going forwards. New draft equality and diversity objectives are currently being discussed with the corporate team and Overview and Scrutiny and through the Induction Programme post May 2023. The Council reported some improvement in member culture and behaviour with fewer complaints and social media problems. The issue is being addressed with Group Leaders. The peer team commented that there have been significant improvements in the culture and behaviour of members since 2016. There was more to do but there was an opportunity to ensure that progress continues after the next set of elections. The Council said that it was part of the "Be a Councillor" campaign to increase councillor diversity. Hybrid working was encouraging a broader range of people to take up the role of councillor. The Council was also upgrading its IT in the council chamber to enable better remote working and involve residents more

in Council meetings.

Organisation and Place Leadership

The peer team recommended that the Council needed to develop a localism strategy with town and parish councils and community groups which could promote greater subsidiarity of decision making and enable RBWM to be more strategic.

The Council reported that the Corporate Plan has recognised the need to improve the way in which it engages with residents and invest in listening, learning and working in partnership. The plan includes a commitment to build stronger trust and relationships with communities; to develop stronger, more community-centric ways of working; and to empower and enable community-led action. It said that progress had been made on developing community relationships over the past six months, for example through its response to the Cost of Living increases, where it has brought together community and council-led support into a targeted campaign - 'Here to Help' – communicated through the VCS and community partners. We heard that it is also working with both community and health partners on the delivery of support to residents who are struggling, through the Household Support Fund and a 'Warm Spaces' network. Relationships with Frimley Integrated Care System (ICS) have been strengthened. The Council are facilitating 'World Cafes' in every ward, in partnership with the ICS, to generate community-led solutions to identified problems, which could then be allocated seed funding through the Innovation Fund. The Council believe that these community-based activities have helped to take forward its' Place Leadership role at a more strategic level. A new Head of Service role has been created to lead partnerships with the VCS and Health and a new Equalities and Community Engagement officer started in May and is leading the development of a strengthened approach to engagement. The next step is to bring this work together into a strategy for community engagement and partnership working. This is currently in development.

The peer team heard that relationships with parishes are being strengthened through the Parish Liaison Forum. Conversations had taken place with the 14 individual parishes, to identify whether they could provide any services such as grounds management. Parishes are also playing an active role in the World Cafes project

and in supporting residents on the cost of living. The peer team were told that a consultation about establishing a town council for Windsor has been undertaken but only 3% of residents responded. Consequently, the Council felt that it did not have a mandate to proceed with this at present, although there was scope to re-run the consultation in the future. It is the view of the peer team that RBWM should pursue the parish and town council agenda more forcefully as part of the council's longer-term approach to financial sustainability and acting as a strategic place leader.

The peer team reminded the Council that in January it had described the organisation as a unitary authority with a district council mentality with regard to place leadership. The challenge then to the Council was to be more ambitious and act on a larger scale. One key to this would be the Borough Local Plan which was due to be adopted in February 2022. The Plan has been adopted and the peer team acknowledge that this was a considerable achievement for the Council. The Council recognises that its Place offer has been under-utilised and under leveraged due to a lack of resources on regeneration and economic development. However, it believes that it has demonstrated a greater level of ambition to lead placemaking, although there was more to do. Evidence of increased place leadership include partnership working with neighbouring authorities, for example pan Berkshire working groups on key themes such as growth, climate, housing, transport and skills and with placemaking leads. The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) are a key part of this work but are not the driving force. The Council is involved in bidding for investment zones and infrastructure funding bids. It wants to play a key role in developing Berkshire through the tourism and pharmaceutical sector as well as a future Berkshire skills academy for film and TV.

The Council agree that it still needs to carve out its own unique selling point and be more ambitious. It sees huge placemaking scope around Windsor and its heritage with potential to make it a future destination town for major events. The funeral of her Majesty the Queen had shown Windsor to the world and generated great interest in the town. Work on developing the vision for Windsor has started with a two-day workshop with stakeholders and key partners. A tourism partnership board has been established which included Legoland and the Crown Estate working together with the council to rebrand Windsor as a tourist destination. It was also working on disability access and raising skills and employment levels in the hospitality sector. In

Maidenhead the station redevelopment and other regeneration in the town was progressing well. The golf club site would see 2,600 new homes with additional space for businesses and possibly an Investment Zone. £18m of infrastructure was going into the site part funded by the developers. In Ascot the High Street project was connecting key partners with parish and ward councillors all working together.

Under recommendation 10 peers suggested that RBWM should take advantage of the 25th anniversary of being a unitary council in 2023 to work with the Youth Council and partners to set out a new 25-year vision for the Royal Borough. We were pleased to be told that the Youth Council has been engaged and has agreed to undertake a piece of work in partnership with Council. The Youth Council will report back the end of the calendar year.

Under recommendation 11 peers asked the Council to consider a peer review of its planning service once the improvement plan for the Planning function is in place and beginning to have an impact. During the progress meeting we were advised that the Planning Service Improvement Plan is now operational and subject to monthly and quarterly review. A Peer Review of the Planning service is likely to be scheduled for 2023/24.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead 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.

Mona Sehgal (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and her e-mail address is

mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk