

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Gedling Borough Council

Wednesday 22 November 2023

Feedback





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# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) from 21 to 23 June 2022 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process. Typically taking place approximately ten months after the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- update peers on the early progress made and receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities/challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were onsite including any further support needs
- discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank Gedling Borough Council (GBC) for its commitment to sector-led improvement and its honesty, openness and self-awareness throughout its discussions with the peer team. GBC clearly has willingness and drive through their comprehensive action plan to progress the peer team's nine key recommendations to full effect. This Progress Review is therefore just the next step in this ongoing, open and close relationship between GBC, the LGA and its sector support.

## 2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at GBC took place on Wednesday 22 November 2023 and focussed on each of the previous CPC's recommendations:

1. reset Gedling Borough Council's ways of working
2. establish a clear strategy for income generation and cost recovery alongside funding bids
3. consider comprehensive customer centred approach to transforming service delivery, and what resources and technology are needed
4. invest to save; good IT systems improve efficiency
5. consider imaginative ways to increase capacity
6. build up programme and project management capacity
7. widen member engagement, particularly through scrutiny

8. use strategic risks and the corporate risk register as part of the corporate planning process
9. widen partnership engagement to include businesses, LEP and Combined Authority discussions.

The following original CPC team members were involved in this Progress Review:

- Cllr Philip Bialyk, Leader of the Council, Exeter City Council
- Alan Goodrum, LGA Associate, former Chief Executive, Chiltern and South Bucks Councils.

Vicki Goddard was the LGA's Progress Review Manager.

The peer team met key GBC colleagues via a series of hybrid meetings on Wednesday 22 November 2023. Cllr Bialyk attended online, and Alan Goodrum and Vicki Goddard were at the council with:

- Cllr John Clarke, Leader of the Council
- Cllr Michael Payne, Deputy Leader, and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources and Performance
- Mike Hill, Chief Executive.

### 3. Progress Review – Feedback

As well as the feedback below on each of its previous CPC's main recommendations, the peer team had some key, overall observations:

- the role of strong, dual leadership – political and operational - throughout the council is key. Such working relationships between the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive, based on mutual respect and support, are helping to ensure the council is working well politically, strategically and operationally. The Leader and Chief Executive should further strengthen these links with cabinet and other councillors, the senior management team and the wider workforce. This is particularly to ensure GBC maximises opportunities to influence developing sub-regional agenda, for example those of the East Midlands Mayoral Combined Authority (EMMCA) and the Greater Nottingham Strategic Partnership
- GBC should develop and define its place-based vision for the borough and its

- own strategic stature with local partners as part of this sub-regional work
- the council should also be culturally more brave, open to and support innovation – not just technology but using council space differently and working with partners in new ways for example as outlined below.

## **1. Reset Gedling Borough Council's ways of working**

Further to its CPC in 2022, GBC introduced a 40 per cent officer attendance rate – two days a week in the office - from June 2023. This factored in GBC's staff travelling profiles and patterns, and has been broadly implemented and welcomed by staff.

A recent survey identified that most staff understand the need to be in the office on this basis but the council recognises that resetting ways of working is about far more than office attendance. It is also about making the best use of council buildings and supporting its staff – especially as many are already regularly working at full capacity, with potential to over-stretch them, for example through sickness absence increases. As part of this, GBC has audited its buildings to identify what space could be better used. The council also knows that its residents, other customers and councillors want to see more GBC staff face to face.

The peer team therefore discussed opportunities for GBC to consider where and how to best deploy staff to meet stakeholders' needs. This includes whether to increase officer attendance at GBC's community hubs and/or at the main council building, depending where customers need to meet staff. It could be counterproductive for example to increase attendance in the main building if that meant additional travel for customers within those office hours, which might not be possible. Other aspects of resetting GBC's ways of working to support staff are covered elsewhere in this report.

## **2. Establish a clear strategy for income generation and cost recovery alongside funding bids**

GBC has undertaken various work in this area. This includes drafting a corporate charging strategy, running a fee setting legal powers workshop to generate and progress ideas, and implementing a litter cleansing charge for one-off events.

Much of this work was paused whilst the Head of Finance and ICT (Information and Communications Technology) post, including the Section 151 role, was vacant. The post has however since been filled, enabling this and other work to progress as a

priority. Capacity is stretched throughout the council though and is not the sole responsibility of the Head of Finance. GBC must therefore ensure all its teams contribute to this agenda from ideas, undertaking relevant training to implementation.

The council's completed leisure services review will play a major part in this income generation and cost recovery strategy. GBC recognises that difficult political decisions need to be made in response to the review's options. This is not only to drive this agenda but also to shape the council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), for example in terms of capital receipts. The peer team therefore advised that now is as ideal an opportunity as any for GBC to make those difficult decisions, at the beginning of its election cycle after the May 2023 local elections, so that the ruling administration has maximum opportunity to implement those choices.

GBC has also commenced a base budget review as part of its annual budget cycle, which will additionally assist this strategy. This includes a full review of fees and charges, and four notable work strands: 1) disposal of its assets/use of capital receipts, 2) reducing the council's annual £1.9 million subsidy of its leisure centres, 3) making further efficiency savings, and 4) digital transformation.

The peer team heard in the week of its visit how, further to the bidding process, the expected announcement on Levelling Up Round 3 funding was being replaced by a direct award to councils, and that GBC was not included. The council utilises its internal skills for bid writing. These are not specialised enough though to write the same quality of bid that external consultants can. Additionally, the council does not have appropriate levels of resource to commission this expensive work. This gives an unfair advantage to other councils. GBC should therefore explore opportunities through the EMMCA to access this level of specialist expertise as and when required, and otherwise consider how to enhance bid writing skills internally.

The peer team also identified opportunities for GBC to enhance its branding, reputation and influence, as a place and employer of choice, especially as the EMMCA becomes 'live' after the May 2024 elections. The more its residents and other local and neighbouring stakeholders see GBC as quality value for money, the more business, funding, and skills via new recruits it can attract into the council.

### **3. Consider comprehensive customer centred approach to transforming service delivery, and what resources and technology are needed**

As well as the leisure services review, the council has also reviewed alternative service delivery model options for environment, development, economic growth and regeneration frontline services. These reviews have resulted in various changes and further activity, for example to build resilience and improve capacity within services, to explore further shared service options. The EMMCA in particular offers potential for further collaboration, such as using new, joint technology and vehicles across the region to enhance waste collection and disposal services, including clear, joint branding to communicate who does what as part of this approach.

The peer team noted however that there are significant opportunities for GBC to make the most of customer-centric work it has already done, such as its customer outreach, cost of living work, and its customer promise. There are also many related support and development opportunities available through the LGA's latest [transformation programme](#). Together, these opportunities will help ensure further service transformation really puts customers at the core of its approach and responds to their needs, including allocating resources needed to achieve this.

#### **4. Invest to save; good IT systems improve efficiency**

GBC has completed a baseline review of its current IT operations and fitness for purpose. The council has also established an internal voluntary, keen, digital transformation team, which is auditing GBC's IT systems and has a work programme to progress this work. The council is additionally recruiting a lead to develop its IT digital strategy but there is no current budget to progress this work beyond planning. This includes no budget to replace and develop any new IT required. Cultural shift is therefore required politically to financially commit to such 'invest to save' technology, to ensure notable enhancements to service delivery, resilience and capacity. These could for example include IT helping councillors to manage and progress casework, and take the pressure off, and free up staff to undertake other required duties or training such as funding bid writing, enhancing their wellbeing, skills and productivity.

#### **5. Consider imaginative ways to increase capacity**

GBC acknowledges it has been difficult to think differently about how to build capacity, as many avenues have already been used. These include working with community and other partners through annually reviewed formal agreements and

contracts. The council is however culturally open to new ideas, the Head of Communities and Leisure is leading work on place based partnerships with health services, and GBC is exploring partnership working with a nearby council.

The peer team and GBC colleagues discussed however how the council could consider further opportunities with its two local universities beyond their existing agreements, which currently include student internships and paid work. Future opportunities for example include building relationships and collaborating with university staff, offering universities council building space for student, council related start-up businesses and projects such as those relating to green, digital, legal and planning agenda. In turn, such university related collaborative working could assist the council's longer term resilience by making better use of office space, and again, releasing GBC staff to work on other priority council projects, undertake required training, and enhancing their wellbeing, skills and productivity.

## **6. Build up programme and project management capacity**

GBC has used Shared Prosperity Funding to recruit a full-time programme manager. Given the scale of the council's refreshed five-year capital programme however, the peer team noted that more such capacity is required to ensure the whole and future programmes are delivered successfully. The Chief Executive had previously created a project manager position to develop this internal capacity but this has now gone. This means that project management knowledge and skills have reduced over the years. The council recognises however that this needs rectifying as soon as possible, as funding this capacity externally each time for individual projects is costly and reduces opportunities to secure and grow these skills internally. Specialist skills are however sometimes still required, for example an IT digital transformation project manager, but cannot always be provided internally. A balance therefore between the two approaches is required.

## **7. Widen member engagement, particularly through scrutiny**

The council has considerably progressed this recommendation. For example, GBC has planned and implemented a member development working group. This involves councillors of all political groups, and democratic services staff, and is already progressing a proactive work programme. This year's councillor induction programme



has particularly benefitted the many new councillors elected in May 2023's local elections. As a result, they are settling into their roles well. A new councillor newsletter has also been well received. An additional cabinet member has brought fresh ideas, different perspective, demographic balance and a new portfolio to help manage and help inform decisions and work programmes.

GBC needs however to monitor and develop this work to ensure it continues to make a positive difference. The peer team heard for example about training needs already identified to help various councillors further understand and progress their work and roles. The overview and scrutiny function could benefit from development sessions to ensure it fully utilises its role to best support cabinet decision making on behalf of the council, sessions the LGA can easily offer. GBC recognises it should also monitor the positive differences made via, and seek feedback on, the new councillor newsletter. This will ensure it is not just an output but leads to improved outcomes, such as enhanced engagement with, and ideas from councillors to further inform GBC's work.

## **8. Use strategic risks and the corporate risk register as part of the corporate planning process**

GBC has enhanced its approach to reporting risk to its audit, and overview and scrutiny committees, and is organising refresher training for managers, and training for cabinet members. Service plans and managers now link to and address corporate risk register mitigations through the council's performance management systems. Some of this work could not progress fully due to the previous Head of Finance and ICT vacancy but should progress now that this appointment has been made. In turn, this should release the Chief Executive from his work in this area.

Whilst councillors are aware of the strategic risks, the peer team suggests more work is needed to ensure cabinet owns and challenges them with service managers at strategic performance management level. The basics however – the principles, mechanisms including performance management and training – are there. So GBC just needs to build on the momentum it has already created around this work to ensure corporate risks are genuinely managed by cabinet.

## **9. Widen partnership engagement to include businesses, LEP and Combined**

### **Authority discussions.**

GBC fully supports the EMMCA devolution deal, and has produced its 'benefits package' and 'corporate ask' to the EMMCA and its future directly elected mayor.

The peer team can see opportunities however for GBC to enhance its place leadership role as part of the EMMCA. This will ensure the council doesn't just ask but influences and persuades the EMMCA and its future mayor of GBC's role and how it can help on behalf of its residents as part of the EMMCA region.

The peer team heard for example how the Leader of the Council has good networks and influence at sub-regional level, for example through the D2N2 (Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire) Local Enterprise Partnership. He and others at the council should therefore build on this work as the EMMCA, Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan and other sub- and regional agenda develop. Given that GBC has no voting power on the EMMCA, it is even more important for GBC to represent its residents and other key stakeholders' needs and aspirations, and maximise and further develop its influence within these agenda.

Additionally, the council should make the most of the university collaboration opportunities mentioned above as part of building this wider partnership engagement, especially in the context of the EMMCA and the Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan.

## **4. Final thoughts and next steps**

The LGA would like to thank GBC for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how GBC wishes to progress things.

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 in this report – especially regarding scrutiny function development - and we would be happy to discuss this further.

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