

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough  
Council

30<sup>th</sup> January 2024

Feedback





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## 1. Introduction

The Council undertook a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during March 2023 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 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 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 '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 Newcastle-under-Lyme BC (NULBC) 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 took place on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024. The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the CPC.

For this Progress Review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Larissa Reed, CEX Swale Borough Council
- Peter Fleming, LGA Peer
- Natalie Wigman, Assistant Director – Regeneration and Growth, Hampshire County Council
- Sue Cuerden, Executive Director of Corporate Services & Assets (Section 151 Officer), Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council
- James Millington, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association



The peer team met face to face at the Council over the course of 1 day with the following representatives:


- Cllr Simon Tagg - Leader
- Martin Hamilton – Chief Executive
- Cllr Stephen Sweeney – Deputy Leader
- Simon McEneny – Deputy Chief Executive
- Service Directors
- Cllr David Jones – Leader of the Opposition
- Chairs of Scrutiny
- The staff ‘Thrive’ group
- External partners

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

The peer team heard about the good progress made against the recommendations following the CPC in March 2023. The peer team felt the ambition and energy of the Council and that some of the things which were being talked about during the CPC are now moving to fruition. Some new opportunities have also presented themselves, particularly around regeneration, and how following the 850 year charter celebrations last year, 2024 is the ‘year of delivery’ for the Council and its ambitions for the Borough.

Regeneration remains an important focus for NULBC, and the means by which some of the projects are being taken forward with partners are innovative approaches to financing and delivery. The peer team recognise that this presents an opportunity to deliver for the Borough and the Council will need to ensure that it continues to maintain a tight grip on the oversight and planning of these to generate the outcomes it desires.

In revisiting, the peer team were reminded about the important work which NULBC



was delivering through its internal One Council Programme and 'Service Director Cluster Model'. The peer team were really pleased to see how this has been further embedded and is working well for the organisation. The Council is also maintaining its strong and impressive approach to partnership working.

There are some imminent changes at the top of the organisation with the CEX stepping down at the end of March 2024. The peer team know that the Council is considering how it will maintain the momentum of delivering on its ambitions and how to avoid the pace of change being impacted. NULBC will want to ensure that there is provision in place through this transition period for the organisation through adequate support for the Leadership Team and interim CEX, but also have support in place for the new CEX.


Below are reflections and feedback from the peer team against the recommendations from the CPC, which builds on the discussions held at the end the peers' time onsite.

**Recommendation 1: Everyone is signed up to the One Council programme. Regularly review the alignment of resources to the programme and ensure staff are kept updated on its achievements.**

The peer team heard how the One Council programme and changes in the way the Council has organised itself has continued to embed and is working well for the organisation. The programme has been clearly articulated through a timetable of activity and communications, including through Castle News, to maintain its profile.

The programme continues to be a priority for the Council and the peer team heard the focus was now on ensuring new performance management systems and changes to the organisational culture become business as usual.

As part of the principles of the One Council programme the new Technology Strategy




supports a 'digital first' approach. The Strategy outlines the vision for technology and how through investment the Council can utilise tools to deliver services, whilst at the same time rationalising existing systems and expenditure, and equip staff with the necessary skills needed.

The peer team heard how the Executive Director Model has developed into a Service Director Cluster Model - where Directors are rotated into leadership positions for a defined amount of time to work on projects and take on additional responsibilities. This is a new and innovative approach and colleagues the peer team met with appreciated this, valuing the opportunities for their personal development, exposure to issues and problem solving, and the connections which could be made with colleagues across the organisation to enhance cross-Council working. Directors spoke positively about this and some pointed to this model and the opportunities as being a key reason for them joining NULBC. The peer team would encourage the Council to continue to keep the model under review and ensure that it is producing the outcomes it is anticipating.

**Recommendation 2: Continue to consider the capacity needs of the organisation and the ability to flex resources to deliver council services and ambitions.**

The peer team heard how NULBC's new People Strategy was developed across the organisation and with the Trade Unions. The Strategy outlines "*how NULBC will create an environment and culture through which our people can flourish and proudly deliver our Council Plan for the benefit of the Borough.*" This is a positive approach in aligning resources with the political ambitions.

Staff the peer team met with again underlined their commitment to the Council and its aims and continue to be a tremendous asset to the organisation and the Borough it serves. In supporting this, the results from the recent staff survey in November 2023 demonstrated increased levels of employee satisfaction and engagement which is a




real testament to how the organisation is run. The peer team spoke to staff who agree that the Council has responded well to the ideas of how to communicate and engage staff – which includes the depot and the use of the staff Thrive Group, which remains a great model. The staff survey results are very impressive and show that 95% of respondents understand what is needed to reach targets and 90% of respondents understand how their role impacts and benefits residents. Officers the team spoke to were confident about the future, and also reflected on the positive staff survey results and the overall feedback but asked that the areas which still needed some attention – including around ensuring their remain opportunities to learn and develop (although this has increased from 40% in 2022 to 74%) - were not forgotten.

**Recommendation 3: The council has a ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunity and ambition for high quality regeneration - consider how you schedule delivery to maximise impact.**

**Recommendation 4: Consider how to keep partners better informed on the progress of regeneration projects.**

The Council articulates lots of really exciting regeneration activity and projects for the Borough and the peer team were impressed with the Council’s ambitions where it is aiming to be ‘industry leading’ in its approach to delivering regeneration. As part of this NULBC has appointed Capital and Centric to masterplan three important projects - York Place, Midway Car Park and the Ryecroft. The proposed approach includes: developing costed proposals for agreement by the Council; NULBC funding the build stage; Capital & Centric purchasing the asset at practical completion at either cost or value; and Capital and Centric retaining and operating the assets, and curating the spaces. This approach is innovative and also financially significant to NULBC as it reprofiles the Council’s borrowing for development over 2-3 years per development, rather than for asset life.

The Council has already committed a lot of time to ensuring this process is clearly understood and the peer team would encourage it maintains its a grip on the detail




and that regeneration is seen as corporately owned - where everyone plays their part in its delivery. This will include ensuring that the governance and legal aspects remain tight, and that the project management detail is monitored closely. This is a new approach for the Council and maintaining a good working relationship, and challenging where appropriate as a client, will be important. The Council already has excellent experience in developing other productive partner relationships and can apply this learning to progress this partnership on delivering on its regeneration ambitions. This may also include NULBC considering buying-in skills at various points to support it in its approach.

The Council has reviewed the approach to communications regarding regeneration with programme newsletters provided to partners through the Town Deal Boards, on projects within the regeneration programmes for Kidsgrove and Newcastle. More widely, the Council has reviewed its approach and capacity for communications across the organisation and has a proposal to deliver these through Staffordshire County Council. The Council will want to keep this under review to ensure that this approach is delivering the outcomes it desires.

**Recommendation 5: Recognising strong financial management, it is important to continue to promote joint responsibility and accountability for the financial health of the organisation and to put in place robust plans and governance to meet future financial challenges.**

The peer team continue to be impressed with how the Council manages its finances. This is testament to the collective approach of the s151 and finance colleagues working with elected Members and officers to find efficiencies and to close the budget gap in 2024/25 without having to call on reserves. It will be important to continue to closely monitor the delivery of the budget and savings throughout the year and ensure Members are able to confidently scrutinise the financial position of the Council. NULBC will want to maintain the discussions around the future years' budget gap and consider any implications of not achieving the budget savings requirements in 2024/25.






Following the CPC the peer team had discussed the need to ensure that everyone was accountable for the financial position of the Council. The peer team heard about the approach the Council had adopted for the development of the 2024/25 budget and the ongoing important role of the Efficiency Boards. During the Progress Review this felt embedded in Member and officer activity, with increased accountability through regular finance reporting and specific monitoring of the externally funded projects including the Future High Street Fund and Town Deal Funds. There are always further opportunities for doing more and to ensure everyone understands the impact of activity on the Council's financial position, and it was good to hear that the Council is planning Budget Holder Training sessions and maintaining its Member training on finance to strengthen corporate responsibility.

There is so much regeneration activity and Council aspiration around ideas for generating income – the Council has refreshed its Commercial Strategy - with considerations around charging and borrowing. As the approach of borrowing for the regeneration activity is new to NULBC it may want to further satisfy itself that its borrowing strategy is viable, adequately assessing and reviewing risks and understanding the wider economic position. It will also need to consider the timing of this to ensure that the level of short term borrowing required is possible for regeneration purposes.

**Recommendation 6: Build on the recent successes in Scrutiny regarding Budget Scrutiny and Walleys Quarry and consider how this approach can be incorporated to ensure Scrutiny works effectively across the organisation.**

The peer team heard that Scrutiny needed further attention and the new Service Director for Legal and Governance is reviewing the current practice and model. NULBC recognises that work remains and there is an opportunity to look at pre-decision scrutiny once further officer capacity has been established. However, the peer team heard about some good examples of Council scrutiny on HS2, on health




matters and the use of task and finish groups, which looked at Social Housing. The peer team also heard that there is a productive approach to working cross-party in Scrutiny which provides a good platform on which to build.

However, the peer team felt that Scrutiny can feel transactional, with some items being provided for updates and for information only rather than Scrutiny being used effectively to positively hold the Executive to account or to inform policy development. Reviewing how the scrutiny programme is developed and the process by which items are added to the agenda could support this improvement. Currently this is not consistent for all committees and subsequently means that the agendas can be quite lengthy and this impacts on the ability of the committees to focus its available time on scrutinising strategically important topics.

Additionally, Scrutiny may benefit from support and advice to the committee not only on the areas of questioning but also around critiquing the answers which they are receiving – as this is particularly important when considering the commercial relationships where the Council will have a client role. The Council will want to assure itself that it has the skills to be able to undertake this role – both for officers and Members - and embed this. This will ensure scrutiny positively shapes the ways in which the projects come forward and are delivered.

A new member development programme is being developed for roll-out from May 2024 to ensure all councillors can effectively develop the skills they need. The peer team think that this is an opportunity to include training for Members around commercial development. The peer team heard that Member support opportunities which are arranged do not consistently attract good levels of attendance. Group Leaders may want to consider how they can encourage wider attendance and how the Constitution and Member Development Working Group designs the development plan in consultation with Members, which includes a range of activities, including internal and external offers.

**Recommendation 7: Consideration should be given for how the council can**



**remain fully involved in discussions to develop and shape post-LEP arrangements and further collaboration with other Councils across the County.**


The Council plays an important and active role in the Staffordshire Leaders' Board, which is providing the means to progress economic development activity post-LEP. The peer team heard about the contributions the Council is making to the development of a pipeline of economic development opportunities and a business engagement mechanism.

The role the Council has on the Staffordshire Leaders' Board is important, championing the north of Staffordshire and the Leader is critical in building positive relationships with Stoke-on-Trent. This puts the Council in a good position and is to the benefit of all partners.

**Recommendation 8: The council can build on the fantastic relationships it has with partners and work together to deliver its strategic ambitions.**

During the CPC in March 2023 the peer team were impressed with the strength and depth of the partnership working and the active role which the Council plays. The Council are keen to maintain and build on this. Partners the peer team spoke with as part of the Progress Review were clear that NULBC remains a key and important partner and the Council continues to be spoken about in really positive terms for the role it plays.

The peer team were made aware of a range of recent activity with partners in delivering against its strategic ambitions including: with the Business Improvement District (BID) to agree shared objectives; the 'Week of Action' with the Police which focused on town centre PSPO enforcement; the Homelessness Hub; and the hugely impactful Vulnerability Hub where partners continue to make a real difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in the Borough. These partner



relationships will continue to be important for NULBC in meeting challenges and delivering its ambitions for the Borough, and it is well placed to continue to build on this.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Newcastle-under-Lyme BC 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.

Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is [helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk).