


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Oadby & Wigston Borough Council

Thursday 17 November 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) from Monday 24 to Thursday 27 January 2022, and promptly published the full report and an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place approximately six 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 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 Oadby & Wigston Borough Council (OWBC) for their commitment to sector support. This six-month 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

This progress review took place remotely on Thursday 17 November 2022 and focussed on each of the key recommendations from OWBC's CPC:

1. plan, develop and communicate a long-term, ie 10 to 20 year, member-led vision for the borough with local stakeholders including residents and partners. This includes working with neighbouring councils and the local Member of Parliament, informally and formally
2. establish ways for members and officers to work more effectively together, especially to: 1) refresh the corporate plan, or draft a new one, and agree how it is monitored, 2) review the member enquiry system, and 3) organise externally facilitated themed workshops for members and officers together, eg political awareness, making and actioning strategic decisions, committee programme

forward planning and performance management

3. communicate and promote the refreshed corporate plan internally and externally
4. Corporate Management (CMT) and Senior Leadership (SLT) Teams should further engage the communications team on projects early to plan communications and consultation about what that council is looking to do, and promote the council's good work
5. align and maintain your MTFP (Medium Term Financial Plan) to the corporate plan and projects to ensure resources are in place to deliver them
6. pick up pace on key areas, eg recruitment, communications strategy, business support and engagement. These key areas include clarifying the role of the unfilled Strategic Director post and filling all vacancies, including appropriate interims as soon as possible, especially human resources staff to reduce pressure on staff and increase pace
7. plan to ensure that all residents can access the services, information and advice that they need
8. explore opportunities to attract external funding to deliver council projects, including increasing your funding bid writing capacity.

The following members of the original CPC team were involved in this progress review:

- David Blake, Managing Director, Worcester City Council
- Cllr Emily Smith, Leader, Vale of White Horse District Council
- Vicki Goddard, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association (LGA).

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

- Cllr John Boyce – Leader of the Council
- Anne Court – Chief Executive
- Tracy Bingham – Strategic Director and S151 Officer
- Philippa Fisher – Strategic Director
- David Gill – Head of Law & Democracy / Monitoring Officer

- Robert Helliwell – Communications and Marketing Manager
- Cllr David Carter
- Cllr Bill Boulter
- Cllr Rosemarie Adams
- Cllr Linda Broadley.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The peer team was genuinely impressed by the amount of positive work that OWBC has undertaken since publishing its action plan on 16 May 2022 to progress the CPC's key recommendations, including:

Recommendation 1 - plan, develop and communicate a long-term, ie 10 to 20 year, member-led vision for the borough with local stakeholders including residents and partners. This includes working with neighbouring councils and the local Member of Parliament, informally and formally.

OWBC's full council approved its vision for the borough on 12 July 2022. This followed two months' extensive work with all members to lead its development. External stakeholders and council staff further informed the vision via workshops and formal consultation. OWBC has promoted the approved vision locally but will progress this further once the council has refreshed and approved its corporate strategy as per Recommendation 2. **OWBC needs to regularly review this vision with its stakeholders to ensure they also contribute to it through their own plans.** This will also help all stakeholders to make best use of their resources, for example through joint working and shared services. **Members need to focus their engagement at strategic and political levels,** so that officers can progress the vision at an operational level, but OWBC has made good progress in facilitating member involvement at strategic level through this work and should **continue this to ensure all members best influence such decisions.**

Recommendation 2 - establish ways for members and officers to work more effectively together, especially to: 1) refresh the corporate plan, or draft a new one, and agree how it is monitored, 2) review the member enquiry system, and 3) organise externally facilitated themed workshops for members and officers

together, eg political awareness, making and actioning strategic decisions, committee programme forward planning and performance management.

OWBC is refreshing its corporate plan into a member-led strategy so that the council has an overall vision, aims and objectives, reflecting the key needs of the borough's principal towns and the council's top priorities. Once full council has approved the strategy in February 2023, it will inform service plans and staff appraisals to ensure the strategy is progressed through monitoring and action as required.

Through a workshop, responding to a survey of members' views, and other work, OWBC has reviewed, refreshed and improved its member enquiry service. **The council should continue monitoring and improving the system to address smaller remaining issues.** This includes training other officers to undertake the central administrative function in case the sole responsible officer cannot.

The council also commissioned LGA workshops in June 2022 to enhance officers' political understanding and members' involvement in the vision for the borough. OWBC also commissioned various Centre for Governance and Scrutiny sessions between October and November 2022 to further enhance members' and officers' understanding of each other's roles and involvement in decision making processes.

Informality and flexibility has particularly helped this work by making it easier, more welcoming and encouraging for members to get more involved and be confident, build trust with officers and strengthen relationships. Such successful examples include a recent budget informing session, purposeful ward walks, buddying and chats between members and SLT officers. **All this work needs to continue to make the most of these enhanced relationships,** particularly to assist future difficult budgetary decisions that OWBC's policy and scrutiny committees will need to make in light of the ongoing national economic situation.

Recommendation 3 - communicate and promote the refreshed corporate plan internally and externally.

OWBC will undertake this work once full council has approved its revised corporate strategy as outlined under Recommendation 2. **The council will need to further engage with its county and neighbouring district councils, and other local partners, at a strategic level and on a regular basis, to best align and make the most of each other's plans and resources,** for example via joint working and

shared services.

Recommendation 4 – CMT and SLT should further engage the communications team on projects early to plan communications and consultation about what that council is looking to do, and promote the council’s good work.

The Communications Team now attends SLT and CMT meetings monthly to ensure its earliest involvement in required projects. There is a communication plan for every required project, including the council’s headquarters move to Brocks Hill Country Park, especially to ensure staff and residents know the latest developments. **OWBC should develop this work further so that all stakeholders know and can action what they need to per project.**

Recommendation 5 - align and maintain your MTFP to the corporate plan and projects to ensure resources are in place to deliver them.

OWBC has developed a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) by refreshing its MTFP, ensuring protocols for reconciling it with the corporate plan and related projects, and has developed a sustainability plan to close its budget gaps, aiming to save £1 million by 2027. **The council needs to test the sustainability plan, and align the MTFS and MTFP with its corporate strategy once full council has approved it in February** to ensure all work is robustly budgeted. The council has reviewed, refined and is using its protocol to identify and establish projects’ resource requirements as part of reviewing and resetting its annual financial cycle. OWBC has also implemented a standardised project appraisal and affordability approach, and is developing an aligned training programme for CMT and SLT. All this work has been led by the council’s refreshed, strong finance team including the Section 151 Officer, who are working with teams’ middle managers across the council and members.

The council recognises however that ever-increasing inflation is already challenging its in-year and future budgets, as demand for its services, and its own costs increase. **OWBC members and officers must therefore continue all this financial work to address these challenges, including its borrowing commitments, boosting its reserves, investment returns and financial resilience.** This is because difficult, strategic discussions and decisions on issues such as shared services, fees and charges will be continually needed. Members may be tempted to postpone such decisions until after the May 2023 local elections. If they do so however, there may

be fewer financial options available by then, given the national economic pace of change. **The peer team therefore strongly recommends that members make required financial decisions with officers at the earliest opportunity before next May's local elections to make the most of the council's current options.**

Recommendation 6 - pick up pace on key areas, eg recruitment, communications strategy, business support and engagement. These key areas include clarifying the role of the unfilled Strategic Director post and filling all vacancies, including appropriate interims as soon as possible, especially human resources staff to reduce pressure on staff and increase pace.

The peer team was particularly impressed with OWBC's rapid progress against this recommendation. This includes the communications team developing and implementing a communications strategy with members, which will be reviewed annually in light of enhanced customer analysis. The council has also recruited to the vacant Strategic Director and other central posts, commissioned external human resources support, and strengthened its finance team's capacity. These new appointments are already driving positive, strategic, operational changes relating to budgets and services throughout the council at pace, enabling the Chief Executive to focus more on corporate and external strategic work. Such work includes building closer relationships and collaboration with the county council, its neighbouring district councils and local universities on shared borough and county wide priorities.

Recommendation 7 - plan to ensure that all residents can access the services, information and advice that they need.

OWBC is developing a customer experience strategy and roadmap, which will be presented to full council in February 2023. The council is establishing a member working group and stakeholder consultation group workshop sessions to further inform this work. OWBC also launched lunchtime opening in April 2022 and plans to increase face to face appointments as part of OWBC's headquarters move to Brocks Hill Country Park.

The council is asking other councils for their digital inclusion and technology strategies to inform their own future approach. OWBC is also planning to analyse demographic information from its new email subscription service to inform and improve future service delivery for all its residents and other users.

Key to all this work is OWBC testing and responding to what this particularly means for disadvantaged and minority groups, so that as many residents as possible can access the council services they need, especially in these challenging economic times. **Members also need to make the most of opportunities to communicate with residents, as conduits between them and the council.** This includes signposting residents to services, feeding their comments back to the council, using the refreshed member enquiry system, and as outlined in the council's communications strategy, showcasing OWBC's positive work via local and social media.

Recommendation 8 - explore opportunities to attract external funding to deliver council projects, including increasing your funding bid writing capacity.

By its own admission, OWBC has not progressed this recommendation as much as it would like. The peer team recognises however that the council has instead prioritised and successfully progressed many of the other CPC recommendations. This is alongside the council responding to substantial additional challenges this year, including the impacts of the Ukrainian crisis, and increased inflation on council finances and service demand.

The council is however developing protocols for identifying and making the most of external funding opportunities and leveraging partnership working, for example with the One Public Estate programme and Homes England. OWBC has also assigned an officer to horizon scan potential funding opportunities, alert relevant service teams to them, and support the development of those teams' bids. **Healthy, productive relationships with funders and partners, and a strong council narrative - what OWBC seeks to achieve and how - are key components of any bidding process. The council should therefore continue such partnership work, including with the private sector and the Arts Council¹, and regularly revise its corporate and service narratives to support its most robust external funding bids. OWBC should also consider training or recruiting a dedicated, central funding bid writer to work with service teams and maintain an overview and record of all the council's bids to inform the strongest and most efficient future submissions.** This could include for example tailoring text from existing bids rather than potentially starting from scratch each time. OWBC is also scoping a bid writing approach as part of project management processes.

OWBC also asked the peer team to explore its [Universities Partnership](#) with its neighbouring authorities and local universities. The peer sees this partnership as a significant opportunity for all involved parties to work together to achieve shared goals and priorities including those in the council's vision for the borough through joint working. Opportunities include making the best use of shared resources such as staff, funding and assets - for example functioning and disused buildings, and land. Partnership meetings to date have been positive and collaborative in agreeing the themes to progress. **The test however is to further develop this approach and these relationships so that the agreed themes result in positive, tangible changes that improve the lives of local people.**

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank OWBC 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 support, there is an on-going support offer to councils, which the LGA is well placed and happy to discuss and provide, along with advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement.

Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser, is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and his e-mail address is mark.edgell@local.gov.uk if you would like to discuss any further support.

ⁱ especially in relation to the Universities Partnership work on arts, culture and heritage – one of the five shared themes involving OWBC, its neighbouring authorities and local universities