

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

St Albans City and District Council

15<sup>th</sup> December 2023

Feedback





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# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 28<sup>th</sup> February – 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 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 St Albans City and District Council 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 at St Albans City and District Council (SACDC) took place on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

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

## Finance

Recommendation 1: Make closing the budget gap for 24/25 everyone's top priority:

- develop the plan and communicate
- sweat your assets
- look for opportunities with partners and stakeholders
- deliver transformation

Recommendation 5: Resource your priorities – do less better

## **Governance and political capacity**

Recommendation 2: Clarify the operation of the committee system:

- roles and responsibilities of officers and councillors
- rationalise service committees
- do scrutiny, finance and performance in service committees
- adopt best practice for committee system

Recommendation 8. Develop councillors (skills and knowledge) - implement succession planning to grow leadership capacity.

## **Vision and Place**

Recommendation 3: Co-develop and communicate a long-term vision for the district.

Recommendation 4: Clarify what growth you want to achieve in advance of the local plan.

## **Decision making:**

Recommendation 6: Develop and build staff confidence to take decisions at the right level at the right time.

Recommendation 7: Streamline decision making processes – review delegations.

## **Communications**

Recommendation 9. Review and develop your strategy for communications - celebrate your successes.

## **Shared Services**

Recommendation 10. Agree your approach to shared services.

## **Performance Management**

Recommendation 11: Golden thread performance framework needs to be developed.

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

- Cllr Bridget Smith, Leader South Cambridgeshire District Council
- Jon McGinty, Managing Director Gloucester City Council
- Kirsty Human, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met face to face at SACDC over the course of a day with the following representatives from the council:

- Cllr Chris White – Council Leader, Lead Councillor for Strategy, Lead Councillor for Planning Policy, Chair of Resources Committee, Chair of Planning Policy and Climate Committee
- Cllr Paul de Kort – Lead Councillor for Resources, Vice Chair of Strategy and Resources Committee
- Cllr Jacqui Taylor – Lead Councillor for Housing and Community Safety, Chair of Housing and Inclusion Committee
- Cllr Lynn Cunningham – Lead Councillor for Heritage and Waste, Vice Chair of Public Realm Committee
- Cllr Sarwar Shamsher – Lead Councillor for Equality and Inclusion, Vice Chair of Housing and Inclusion Committee
- Cllr Raj Visram – Lead Councillor for Climate, Vice Chair of Planning Policy and Climate Committee
- Cllr Robert Donald – Chair of Licensing Committee
- Cllr Edgar Hill – Chair of City and Neighbourhoods Committee
- Cllr Simon Grover – Group Leader, Greens and Independent Group
- Cllr Brian Ellis – Group Leader, Conservative Group
- Amanda Foley, Chief Executive
- Christine Traill, Strategic Director – Community and Place Delivery
- Suzanne Jones, Strategic Director – Customer, Business and Corporate Support
- Linda Parker Assistant Director – Finance, Customer, Business & Corporate Support

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- Stuart Fitzsimmons Assistant Director – Public Realm, Community & Place Delivery
  - Tom Hardy Assistant Director – Built Environment, Customer, Business & Corporate Support
  - Robin Ray Assistant Director – Regulatory and Compliance, Community & Place Delivery
  - Simon Smith Assistant Director – Housing, Community & Place Delivery
  - Charles Turner - Solicitor to the Council
  - Anita O'Malley - Democratic Services Manager
  - Claire Wainwright – Strategy and Policy Manager (Communications Lead and Performance Framework Lead)

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

It was clear from the documentation reviewed ahead of the visit and the conversations that took place during the day, that SACDC had taken the recommendations of peers seriously and had made significant progress on all of them. The nature of the recommendations and timescales over which they operate means none of them are quick one-off solutions. Many require longer term or continuous focus in order to deliver.

There was a very optimistic atmosphere in the council with councillors feeling supported by officers and officers appreciating the roles of councillors – which all contributed to a positive culture.

Peers were very satisfied the officer and political leadership were doing all they could to address the recommendations and make the required improvements.

#### **Finance**

Recommendation 1: Make closing the budget gap for 24/25 everyone's top priority:

- Develop the plan and communicate.
- Sweat your assets.
- Look for opportunities with partners and stakeholders.
- Deliver transformation.

Recommendation 5: Resource your priorities – do less better.

It was clear from everyone peers spoke with, that the budget and financial situation is well understood by politicians and managers across the council. The S151 officer, finance team and finance lead councillor have put on a united front, briefing councillors and officers, and communicating the key messages to partners and stakeholders. All policy committees held a recorded vote to note the financial situation. Two finance sessions have been held with councillors to help them understand the local government financial arrangements, with a third catch all session offered. There are posters around the building, encouraging staff to put forward efficiency/income generating ideas. The financial position of the council has genuinely become everyone's responsibility.

Peers were pleased to hear of the proactive work taking place with partners and the ways in which they are supporting the council to ease financial pressures for example, by reviewing contracts and exploring sponsorship. Discussions around sponsorship could prove very helpful, as could standardising fees and charges across Hertfordshire. SACDC actively seeks advice from across the sector and this is helping to replicate best practice and avoid duplication of effort.

The finance team have worked hard to improve the management information and speed of producing data in order to allow for more robust decision making with a fuller range of options, explanation of implications and risks. This is allowing the committees to consider more timely information to support service delivery and performance. It also allows the Lead Councillor Team (LCT) to consider the figures on a much more frequent basis, avoiding overspends and unanticipated financial challenges without time to resolve. Peers also heard the statement of accounts for 2022/23 had now been submitted which during the CPC had been delayed due to lack of resources.

The council is in a challenging financial position with a £2.54m budget gap to address this year. They are confident of meeting this with the measures put in place, which include:

- A 35% reduction in borrowing
- Increase of fees and charges
- Income generation
- Cost savings and efficiencies.

These measures do not completely meet the shortfall and work is ongoing to identify the remaining £0.3m. The council is confident in achieving a balanced budget for 2024/25 by using reserves and it hopes to increase its income from commercial interests including Jubilee Square over the next 12 months.

General Fund reserves are low at just £2-3m. Using reserves to balance the budget is not sustainable after next year and there is another £2m budget gap to fill in 2025/6. The council focus must therefore remain on tackling the financial challenge, ensuring this is a constant priority and an area of work for everyone to continue to take responsibility for.



There is still a sense from those officer's peers spoke with that SACDC delivers a lot and there hasn't been much progress in doing fewer things better. The transformation programme is supporting this work but needs to be further embedded before tangible savings and efficiencies are produced. The biggest change has been in customer delivery, with resources moved around, administration functions being carried out by different services and reduced hours of opening for some services based on user data and need. The digital changes are taking more time, but the programme is better understood, and people can see what it is trying to achieve. As part of the financial challenge, peers suggest the council reviews service delivery against affordability. And weave discussions on delivery options into the conversations with partners.

### **Governance and political capacity**

Recommendation 2: Clarify the operation of the committee system:

- Roles and responsibilities of officers and councillors.
- Rationalise service committees.
- Do scrutiny, finance and performance in service committees.
- Adopt best practice for committee system.

Recommendation 8. Develop councillors (skills and knowledge) - implement succession planning to grow leadership capacity.

Peers were impressed the council had taken on board all their recommendations in regard to the operation of the committee system. Having spent some time looking at other models, five months ago, the number of committees were reduced, and responsibilities shared between the remainder. The scrutiny committee was disbanded and instead each service committee gained a scrutiny function. The Audit Committee became Audit and Governance Committee and continues to be independently chaired. A new Constitution Committee meets twice a year to consider any revisions that are proposed, and new names were being used to refer to informal and formal meetings of the senior political leadership.

An informal "Quad" meeting takes place once per month. This involves the leader, deputy leader, finance lead councillor and housing lead councillor along with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Other councillors and officers can be added in as

and when the discussion warrants it. To date this group has met informally to discuss the budget challenges and reviewing the municipal calendar. It helpfully creates an informal space for open and honest discussions to take place ahead of formal proposals being taken forward to committees.

In addition, a new Lead Councillor Team (LCT) has been established which involves the quad plus all committee chairs and vice chairs. They meet fortnightly as lead councillors to discuss items going forward to the committees and any other political business.

Both councillors and officers have welcomed the governance changes and feel the impact has resulted in strengthened relationships. There are now fewer meetings which has been helpful to officers but there remains a number of pre-meeting briefings which, from an officer's perspective, could be reduced further.

Peers heard that the scrutiny function in the committees is working better in some than others and needs more time to be embedded and for councillors to appreciate the value it can bring. Councillor items and questions also need to be better utilised; it is hoped over time as councillors see good examples of this, it will instil confidence in others to use the process more.

The councillor induction programme was well regarded by councillors and the cross-party councillor development steering group meets to discuss the annual training programme and induction. Succession planning and leadership capacity has been developed through the new structure. Lead councillors know their areas well and through the Quad and LCT are starting to really focus on the council's strategic direction and be less involved in the operational matters.

Peers were given a demonstration of the councillor intranet which was very impressive. A superb resource for all councillors and a great communications vehicle.

## **Vision and Place**

Recommendation 3: Co-develop and communicate a long-term vision for the district.

Recommendation 4: Clarify what growth you want to achieve in advance of the local plan.

The leader and chief executive continue to operate at the strategic level with partners, to promote the council's position in the county as a key visitor destination.

Work continues with the Local Enterprise Partnership and Hertfordshire Growth Board to shape the vision and place narrative for the county. SACDC is looking to develop a community strategy, the principles of which have been agreed. Work will commence in the new year in collaboration with partners and stakeholders to draft the content which will support the council in communicating its long-term vision for the district and how everyone contributes to it.

The Planning Policy Committee has since the CPC become a committee in its own right and is now responsible for overseeing the delivery of the Local Plan led by the leader and chief executive. This has focussed the committee's work and supported the timetable to move at pace. It is important the whole council support the development of the Local Plan as a vehicle for delivering long term growth in the district.

Since peers last visited, SACDC has completed the regulation 18 part of the Local Plan without any significant issues or risks emerging. Achieving the end date of 2025 for the Local Plan submission is still going to be challenging, especially as the period for consultation ahead of regulation 19 needs to be extended to allow for additional work to take place.

**Decision making:**

Recommendation 6: Develop and build staff confidence to take decisions at the right level at the right time.

Recommendation 7: Streamline decision making processes – review delegations.

The slightly smaller Senior Leadership Team (SLT) has driven decision making down through the organisation as responsibilities have been shared around. The introduction of a Wider Leadership Team (WLT) which includes the assistant directors has increased the confidence and further empowered this group to lead their services. Giving responsibility to the WLT to review the process of delegations and the powers within, was a good way of utilising their skills, experience and knowledge. Peers encourage the council to look at more opportunities for this type of work.

The leader and chief executive have created more resilience by sharing the lead partnership roles with their deputies and senior officers/councillors. This has been

positively welcomed and encourages succession planning.

Peers heard about pockets of creativity and innovation from across the services with a mixed involvement of senior officer and political involvement. There are clearly still some areas where councillors tend to move into the operational space, although this has improved. Examples of senior officer engagement on operational matters were also referenced. Peers encourage the SLT and LCT to continue their journey in being less involved in operational matters and trusting managers to deliver. However, there is a responsibility for managers to remain responsive to underline their case.

## **Communications**

Recommendation 9. Review and develop your strategy for communications - celebrate your successes.

Peers were really pleased the council had taken their advice and commissioned an LGA communications review. The recommendations of this were now being delivered through an action plan. Internal communications were described to peers as good but external communications triggered a mixed response. There were complaints about the website and a desire to be more proactive with positive communications. Peers had said previously to celebrate success and whilst this seemed to be the case for the markets and museums/events, the hard work delivered by other teams could benefit from more promotion.

The council has a very small communications team and there are plans to better utilise the skills and capacity from other areas of the council including the markets and museums teams. Peers encourage the council to use these teams to support the council more corporately.

To drive improvement in this area, peers suggest the council prioritises two of the recommendations from the communications review. Firstly, consider a task and finish group to look at the website, to propose changes based on what is liked, not liked and best practice in this area. Peers also believe developing a communications strategy is key to improvement. This should be co-produced with officer and councillor involvement to ensure everyone is clear about what the vision is and what is in/out of scope.

## Shared Services

Recommendation 10. Agree your approach to shared services.

The council actively continues to discuss sharing services with its neighbours. There is a commitment for SACDC, Watford, Dacorum and Three Rivers to work together on an iterative basis, developing business cases for specific services as and when appropriate. The approach is driven by efficiencies, added resilience and improved performance rather than just cost.

The leader met with the leaders of the other councils recently to recommit to the arrangements and the chief executive continues to work on a proposal to pilot a shared planning validation service. Dacorum are relatively new to the group and will be joining the Legal shared service soon.

## Performance Management

Recommendation 11: Golden thread performance framework needs to be developed.

SACDC has developed a new performance management framework which has landed well with the new committees and clearly sets out what the council wants to achieve. There are a small number of key performance indicators (KPIs) considered at each committee with a host of other indicators sitting in the background should they be required. This has enabled councillors to focus on the most important areas, the KPIs linked to the councils' priorities, corporate plan and medium-term financial strategy.

The next step is to embed the new framework within the service plan and staff appraisal process to ensure staff know how their work is contributing to delivering the priorities. This will need careful consideration as the current priorities are very politically driven and it's not clear how some business-as-usual roles will see the linkages.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank SACDC 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.

Rachel Litherland (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is [rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk](mailto:rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk), Tel: 07795 076834