

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge - Progress Review

Huntingdonshire District Council

4 March 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) 15 – 17 May 2024 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:

- Receive feedback from peers on the early progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council’s RAG rated CPC action plan.
- 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 Huntingdonshire 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 Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) took place (onsite) on 4 March 2025.

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

Vision and Priorities

Recommendation 1 - Align finance and workforce to deliver the agreed political priorities including a review of organisational structure.

Communications and Engagement

Recommendation 2 - Strengthen the internal approach to engagement which ensures the voice of residents/service users are at the heart of decision making.

Recommendation 3 - Develop a resourced communications and engagement strategy which defines the HDC brand and strategic narrative.

Planning

Recommendation 4 - Review the planning service to ensure that within the planning policy framework the council's priorities are being delivered, for example climate change, environment and inclusive growth.

Workforce

Recommendation 5 - Deliver the imminent workforce strategy at pace - including addressing staff concerns.

Governance and Scrutiny

Recommendation 6 - Continue to strengthen the council's approach to governance, compliance and risk.

Recommendation 7 - Support and develop a member led scrutiny work programme and prioritise areas where they can add value and help mitigate risk - SLT support.

Transformation

Recommendation 8 - Define and communicate your approach to transformation and continuous improvement.

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

- Chief Executive Lead Peer, Kate Ryan, New Forest District Council
- Member Peer, Jim Mckenna, Independent Member Peer, Cornwall Council
- Member Peer, William Nunn, Conservative Member, Breckland Council
- Kirsty Human, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Peers returned to Huntingdonshire District Council during a period of significant importance for local government following the English Devolution White Paper. In addition to the scale of activity and change the organisation is going through, peers reflected on the openness, positivity and willingness to learn from everyone spoken to throughout the progress review. Local government reorganisation (LGR) was not a distraction or something to fear but rather an opportunity for the council to promote the economic growth, development and cultural prospects of the district. The council's political and managerial leadership want to use the CPC progress review for due diligence to support the LGR process.

It is testament to the council's fortitude, drive for improvement and solid leadership that all eight of the CPC's recommendations have been significantly progressed. Of the CPC's eight recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 63 per cent of recommendations are complete and 37 per cent continue to be progressed.

It became clear during the progress review that the use of RAG ratings for the recommendations is not nuanced enough to reflect the progress being made. Peers received comments like "there is a lot of green" or "how can it all be complete". HDC's leadership and peers agreed that most recommendations contained elements of work that had been completed but also some that would take more time to achieve the outcomes the council desired. It was agreed that future reporting on the actions would look to reflect the ongoing nature of the work to ensure full understanding and embedding of all elements.

Vision and Priorities

Recommendation 1 - Align finance and workforce to deliver the agreed political priorities including a review of organisational structure.

A senior officer restructure has been implemented which aligns the three new corporate director roles with the council's three corporate priorities:

- Communities - priority 1: improving quality of life for local people.
- Place - priority 2: creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations.
- Finance and resources - priority 3: doing our core work well.

This has generated increased focus on delivery of priorities, ownership and accountability of performance and more understanding with staff around how their work aligns with what the council wants to achieve.

The council's [budget was approved on 26 February](#) enabling the finances to align with the corporate priorities. Provision of a £750,000 fund to support community health and wealth building over three years is key to delivering the corporate priorities. Officers have now turned their attention to how the funds will be allocated along with processes, procedures and member oversight to ensure good governance of the fund.

Given the importance of LGR and the role HDC is playing in this, peers were supportive of the £1m ring fenced reserve to support this work, in addition to the planned work on service transformation.

Communications and Engagement

Recommendation 2 - Strengthen the internal approach to engagement which ensures the voice of residents/service users are at the heart of decision making.

HDC hosted three community co-production workshops in August and September 2024, which were as demographically balanced as possible to gather diverse voices from across different communities. Further focus groups have taken place with seldom heard groups, including young people and people living in low-income households, rural communities, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Peers could clearly see how the outcomes and key messages from this work directly supported the business case to provide a community health and wealth building fund.

Further examples of good practice across the council were raised by staff, including working with service users to support an accreditation from the

Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA), involving service users in selecting new equipment at the leisure centres and seeking views on refurbishment.

A senior leadership team (SLT) and cabinet survey on consultation and engagement enabled consideration of a range of options to support improvements in engagement, consultation and sharing of information. A proposal for a fixed term role to lead on this area of work is being considered and peers strongly support implementing this. There are more opportunities for engagement and for improved coordination across the council if capacity can be created; examples include the Local Plan, LGR, community health and wealth building, and the redesign of leisure facilities. A role to coordinate work across these larger projects whilst supporting and mentoring service areas through smaller exercises would help to embed good practice throughout the council and put service users right at the heart of decision making.

Recommendation 3 - Develop a resourced communications and engagement strategy which defines the HDC brand and strategic narrative.

Following the CPC the LGA facilitated a workshop which led to the development of a new corporate narrative, which the council set as its strategic 'north star'. Clearly a lot of thought and work has gone into producing this, but peers found limited understanding or knowledge of the narrative amongst staff and members, apart from within human resources where the corporate narrative had benefitted recruitment, with consistent advertisements and understanding of the council.

Consisting of almost 450 words, peers felt the corporate narrative needed a short punchy statement to accompany it, that every member of staff and councillors would be able to remember and cite when talking about the council. The communications team are seeking to address this and create consistency in application by using different elements of the narrative to support internal and external communication.

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The political group leaders could play a stronger role in communicating key messages, documents and policies within group meetings ahead of formal committee meetings to ensure better understanding. This would also help members to feel more confident in using elements of the corporate narrative and key political lines in their own communications.

It was good to see a restructure of the communications team had resulted in additional capacity and skills. Cabinet have informally endorsed a new communications strategy and plan for the period 2024 – 28 which the team are committed to delivering with council support. There now needs to be greater visibility and understanding of the new strategy and plan with all councillors.

Peers heard about the three campaigns being delivered to support each of the corporate priorities:

- Priority 1: improving quality of life for local people – “Hunts hears” an engagement campaign.
- Priority 2: creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations – “Place successes” a campaign focused on the benefits of council grants.
- Priority 3: doing our core work well – “The quiet friend” an animation campaign to show how many services are accessed daily by a typical member of the public.

The success of these campaigns could constitute best practice, and peers were keen to follow their progress and share in the learning.

Planning

Recommendation 4 - Review the planning service to ensure that within the planning policy framework the council's priorities are being delivered, for example climate change, environment and inclusive growth.

Following the CPC, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) completed a review of HDC's planning service in December 2024. The final report is due to be published imminently, supported by workshops with staff and

councillors to talk through the recommendations, next steps and development of an action plan.

In anticipation of the PAS review recommendations, peers were pleased to hear additional resource has been secured for two years to lead a change programme within planning. The main responsibilities of the role will be to turn the report's recommendations and conclusions into an action plan and support implementation of changes to drive improvements in the service.

Political oversight will be key to navigating the implications of some changes and peers considered there was an opportunity to utilise the council's scrutiny functions to oversee the action plan and implementation of the recommendations.

Consultation on the most recent issues and options for the local plan saw over 6,000 responses. The planning policy team trialled the use of Microsoft Copilot to summarise the consultations. This resulted in freeing up a lot of officer time and the council is looking at how to embrace artificial intelligence software and digital applications further across the service and the wider council.

A greater emphasis on how the planning service supports delivery of the corporate priorities, specifically, climate change, environment and inclusive growth is being considered through engagement with the team. An independent project review has identified lessons learnt at sponsor and tactical levels to inform future change programmes involving planning. Furthermore, monthly elected member briefings are being used to encourage a holistic view to delivering the council's growth and development ambitions.

LGR is at the forefront of thinking on the local plan. The leadership are clear that significant economic growth is required to support the financing of services, particularly those additional functions associated with unitary status that the district is not currently responsible for. To this end, the ambition for growth, economic development, and visions for towns and investment in the district is significant, cutting across all three corporate

priorities and focusing the minds of the senior leaders when promoting and selling Huntingdonshire as a place destination.

Workforce

Recommendation 5 - Deliver the imminent workforce strategy at pace - including addressing staff concerns.

There is no doubt the council has prioritised delivering the workforce strategy. Two staff have been seconded into fixed term roles to drive forward the action plan, engage with staff and report progress quarterly via the employment committee and every two weeks with the chief executive as sponsor. Peers witnessed a shift in organisational culture and wellbeing and staff spoke of a sense of momentum within the council. SLT have delivered roadshows at all employee sites, promoting the purpose of the strategy and its benefits to staff. They have asked for ideas and suggestions on how to make HDC an employer of choice, and staff have been forthcoming.

HDC is listening to its staff and making changes, for example implementing a 20 per cent staff discount for pay and play, gym memberships, swimming lessons, children's parties and adding a discount for people one year post retirement to support health and wellbeing.

Activities and initiatives to date include:

- Procuring a new Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).
- Expanded menopause offer to staff.
- Developed a buddy scheme for new staff - lots of interest from staff offering to be buddies.
- Set up health kiosks to check BMI, heart rate and blood pressure - 34 people were triggered to see a GP, so the council bought a nurse in to the offices to do appointments at work.
- Developed an employee handbook.
- Formal recognition and celebration of key national events/days - International Women's Day, Comic Relief, Blue Monday, Acts of Kindness Day.

- Launched a new leadership development programme for managers.

The action plan contains an “embed” column to ensure these activities and more are sustainable and will continue into the future with a designated owner.

The staff peers spoke with are clearly feeling much more engaged and happier to work for HDC. Reference was made to the Christmas decorating competition, the chief executive’s weekly email, senior management visibility, and engagement with staff on a development of a new 121 form. Activities that have clearly improved morale and provided opportunities for engagement and communication.

The only element staff remained dissatisfied with was pay and remuneration. This was raised in conversations and is reflected in the staff survey (September 2024) as the top thing staff would change about their job, with incremental progression coming fourth and recognition and reward sixth.

Provision has been made within the budget to resolve any outstanding salary issues associated with the workforce strategy, but the next steps to progress this issue remain unclear to staff. Peers suggest further communication of the process and timeline for how reviewing the 121 processes, working with Unison, looking at performance management and learning and development will be linked to pay increments and remuneration in the future.

Governance and Scrutiny

Recommendation 6 – Continue to strengthen the council’s approach to governance, compliance and risk.

A new constitution working group has been established and begun to review the council’s procedure rules and scheme of delegation. The scope of the group’s work will be factoring in LGR and prioritising key elements of the constitution to ensure HDC remains agile and efficient whilst also safe and legal.

A new corporate director for finance and resources was recruited at the end of 2024 and took over responsibility for overseeing governance, risk and compliance. The role of monitoring officer (MO) has been disaggregated from the 3C partnership and HDC are interviewing for their own role imminently. This is an important milestone for the council and will ensure ongoing governance improvements and greater oversight whilst relieving pressure on the democratic services and elections manager, and chief executive.

Since the CPC, vacancies in the internal audit and risk management services have stalled the progress being made on the 17 recommendations from the LGA peer challenge of internal audit arrangements in 2023 and five recommendations from the LGA Governance Peer Challenge in May 2024. In addition, the council's external auditor EY are suggesting not enough internal audits have been completed to provide adequate assurance across governance, risk and internal controls.

Peers were reassured to hear that the new corporate director of finance and resources is starting to renew the rigour and grip around governance by appointing RSM to resolve outstanding internal audit issues and deliver a new set of audits for 2025/26. The appointment creates greater capacity in internal audit more generally and has been extended to support the councils risk function whilst options for longer term provision are considered.

Peers would like to see the outstanding recommendations from previous audit and governance peer challenges addressed and progress overseen by the corporate governance committee.

The council's risk register has been taken offline, reviewed and reshaped with SLT making it more manageable and fit for purpose. There is a shared approach to risk across SLT creating greater accountability, but the function is not settled within the organisation with the resource to keep it actioned and fed into corporate governance. There is a suggestion risk could find a home within the new transformation team which in time may

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prove to be a sensible approach. In the short term RSM will continue to provide support in this area. HDC may find the new LGA [must know guide: risk management](#) helpful when considering options.

Recommendation 7 - Support and develop a member led scrutiny work programme and prioritise areas where they can add value and help mitigate risk – SLT support.

HDC has two overview and scrutiny panels.

- Environment, communities and partnerships
- Performance and growth

Since the CPC, training has been provided regarding self-scrutiny with the following improvements identified:

- Ensure less pre-decision scrutiny and less for information items.
- Develop a clearer forward plan of items for scrutiny consideration, making use of service plan actions.
- Identify additional topics outside of service plan scope.
- Identify policy development involvement.
- Identify agenda items following monthly member briefings.
- Identify external partners to present to panel to strengthen partnership working.

Working with the member development group, further learning and development opportunities are being explored for all members and an increased budget is supporting this. Senior officer support has been provided by way of the directors for place and communities taking the lead for each panel and briefing of the chairs. Officers have supported and worked with chairs and vice chairs to set the workplans and consider topics, with much of the workplan being member led. Through discussions with officers and elected members peers sensed a consensus that performance of the panels is improving.

However, members of the performance and growth scrutiny panel had concerns about the size of their agenda, particularly as most members work full time, there was a feeling this isn't allowing enough time to

support good scrutiny. Peers observed that the size of agenda packs for this committee were as follows: March 2025 – 136 pages, February 2025 – 270 pages, December 2024 – 66 pages, November 2024 – 186 pages, October 2024 – 36 pages, September 2024 – 3446 pages.

Clearly a work in progress, further discussion between chairs and their SLT director lead could help to refine the information required by the panel with perhaps further information available on request or by exception.

Transformation

Recommendation 8 - Define and communicate your approach to transformation/ continuous improvement.

Peers were pleased to hear of appointment to a new chief digital information officer across the shared 3C ICT service who was reporting to each of the three chief executives to drive change. This has created stability within the partnership and a refreshed focus for HDC in the use of technology to achieve efficiency.

The improvement team is now the transformation team and appointment to a new business performance and transformation manager was completed at the end of the year. The new team are focussed on taking forward the council's transformation programme, which considering other priorities for example, ensuring HDC is best in class and leaves a community legacy, is still evolving.

A new approach to service planning has been launched for 2025/26 to generate a single transformation plan focused on change projects. The ambition is to achieve a 15 per cent net reduction in expenditure through efficiency savings and/or increased income or commerciality. Services will be supported to look at digital methods of delivery, channel shift and reviewing the customer experience.

Given the change the council has gone through over the past 18 months, culturally there are still parts of the organisation that need further engagement to understand what is meant by transformation. Following completion of service plans in April, it will be important to develop the

transformation plan and communicate this extensively across the organisation with officers and elected members. Peers suggest there is an opportunity to link the plan to the corporate priorities and create themes or pillars (like the workforce plan model) to group projects according to their drivers, for example, technology, workforce, structures, culture, communications and so on.

It may prove helpful to the new transformation team to explore the [resources available from the LGA on transformation](#) and consider opportunities to be part of round tables and action learning sets. The support for elected members may also help with increasing understanding and the art of the possible.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Huntingdonshire District Council 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