


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Warwickshire County Council

14th November 2022

Feedback – Published June 2023





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1. Introduction

The council undertook a Local Government Association (LGA) corporate peer challenge across the three days from 8th to 10th March 2022. The council published the related report on 16th June 2022 when it, along with an outline action plan responding to the peer team's recommendations, was considered by Cabinet.

The council's Integrated Delivery Plan (IDP) acts as a continuous improvement mechanism for the organisation and contains all of the recommendations from the corporate peer challenge. The council's Corporate Policy Team is tracking progress on the actions relating to the recommendations until they are completed and/or built into the IDP.

A progress review is an integral part of the peer challenge process. It is designed to provide the opportunity for the council to:

- Update peers on the progress made in relation to the recommendations made by the peer team and to receive feedback on this
- Consider the 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 impact and learning from the progress made to date

As was reflected upon at the start of the progress review session, the global and national context has clearly changed significantly since the time of the corporate peer challenge. This includes the conflict in Ukraine and its impacts; the growing cost of living crisis; changes at government level; and the state of the economy and the consequential impacts on council finances.

The LGA would like to thank Warwickshire County 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 the LGA and sector-led support.

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at Warwickshire County Council took place remotely on the morning of Monday 14th November 2022. The following individuals, drawn from the original peer team, were involved:

- Rachael Shimmin, Chief Executive, Buckinghamshire Council
- Councillor John Hart, Leader, Devon County Council
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The Leader, a number of Cabinet members, the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors participated in the session on behalf of the council, with support from colleagues from the Corporate Policy Team.

The following written feedback is provided under the five corporate peer challenge themes and reflects the way in which the council sees things having progressed since the original corporate peer challenge.

3. Progress review - feedback

Organisation and Place Leadership

The corporate peer challenge recommended the strengthening of key strategic partnerships in the county. In response, the council's 'Team Warwickshire' approach has been launched. This is focused on partners collectively addressing the key issues facing the county. There is involvement across the district and borough council level and from police and health partners; the voluntary and community sector; the 'Voice of Warwickshire' residents panel; the University of Warwick; and business groups including the Chamber of Commerce, Local Enterprise Partnership, Growth Hub and Federation of Small Business. Cross-party involvement from within the county council also features. The aim is to target resources and effort in addressing disparities in socio-economic outcomes within the county.

'Team Warwickshire' was launched in June with a partnership workshop dedicated to 'Levelling Up' and devolution and this was followed by a second workshop on this

theme in October. A cost of living summit is being held later this month, seeking to harness the power of partner organisations working together and pooling resources.

The sense from the council is that 'Team Warwickshire' is acting as a platform that partners are signed up to. The approach builds on that seen in the joint working and collective response to the pandemic. Devolution has also acted as a catalyst and 'Team Warwickshire' is seeking to capture the ambitions for localities held at the various tiers of local government and help to define what the county will look like into the future.

'Team Warwickshire' and the workshops have triggered ongoing work to develop local 'Levelling Up' plans in the five district and borough geographies, with an aim of targeting public sector resources to greatest effect and leveraging private sector investment. Elected members have a crucial role as community leaders in the development of these plans. There is a growing focus too on work at 'Lower Super Output Areas' which will see an even more targeted focusing of resource on 22 such areas featuring in the 20% most deprived in England, with 'community conversations' central to this approach.

The 'Team Warwickshire' approach is seen by the council to have aided relations between the two primary tiers of local government within Warwickshire. The council feels that relationships are better than before, with key issues being raised and discussed now. People are pulling together and driving what is important for communities. The space that exists for the Leaders and Chief Executives to come together provides a forum to discuss, collaborate and co-produce. Currently such meetings take place as and when need arises. The peer team suggested, based on experiences in Devon, that moving to things being scheduled, with planned agendas that still provide scope to weave in issues that suddenly emerge, may be beneficial. The council highlighted this as something to reflect upon, although it would be important to retain a sense of dynamism and urgency around the meetings and with them only taking place when there is a clear purpose.

The peer team also suggested the development of a forward plan of work with the district and borough councils. This would provide a clear focus on an agreed set of outcomes and shared objectives – whilst leaving scope to respond to emerging issues. The council indicated that it saw partners already coalescing around joint

themes and priorities, including 'Levelling Up', which could provide the basis for a forward plan. However, getting the timing right in proposing the idea of such a plan would be crucial recognising other meetings are already taking place.

The council reflected that things are progressing well also at the next tier of local government, with the Parish and Town Council Steering Group seeing more and more councils joining from that level.

Local Priorities and Outcomes

The corporate peer challenge recommended the development of a cross-Warwickshire approach to 'Levelling Up'. As outlined earlier, the response can be seen in the form of 'Team Warwickshire' and the focus it is applying to the 'Levelling Up' agenda, including the published county-wide approach and the five plans being developed at district and borough level. This work is seen by the council to be supported by a robust evidence base. It has also been linked to the council's Integrated Delivery Plan and this will be developed further as part of the 2023/34 business planning cycle.

The corporate peer challenge also recommended the increased targeting of resources on the climate change agenda. The council has developed a draft Sustainable Futures Strategy, which is currently being consulted upon, and which, once finalised, will be supported by a dedicated delivery plan providing a focus for public and partner engagement. Essentially the strategy and delivery plan are looking to make 'carbon net zero' tangible, translating the agenda into what it means for communities.

The council is building a team and resources around sustainability and climate change, with feasibility studies being undertaken to inform the delivery plan which will be costed. Climate change funding of £2m has been made available from council reserves. Also, existing aspects of the budget are adapting to provide, for example, investment in LED lighting, the vehicle fleet and solar energy. The council is cognisant, though, of a tension starting to be played out between its climate change ambitions over the coming years and the immediacy of the cost of living crisis – in a context of its current uncertain funding and what it sees as an uncertain strategic picture nationally around net zero plans and associated funding.

Financial Planning and Management

Home to school transport represents the council's biggest financial pressure currently. The peer team asked whether council policy is in line with national statutory minimum guidelines and what the attitude of staff is towards limiting spend. The council indicated it is focused on trying to bring clarity and understanding to what is appropriate and right to offer families. Efforts are also being made to make things more explicit and transparent for service users and staff during the process of making and responding to home to school transport requests, in order that the cost implications of different arrangements are made transparent and can inform decision-making. The council has also brought together the functions responsible for the commissioning of home to school transport relating to SEND and to other operations, which previously sat separately.

As part of the response to the financial and demand pressures facing the council, quarterly reporting of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) budget to Corporate Board and elected members has been introduced. A strategy to reduce SEND spend is now in place, which has served to reduce the Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs overspend from £8.6m in 2020/21 to a forecasted overspend of just under £5m for 2022/23. The council has also created an adult social care reform programme to deal with and prepare for central government's national reforms which the council sees as creating very challenging financial circumstances. This is a key focus for the Corporate Board as part of its ambitions around having on-going oversight of a well-controlled budget.

The corporate peer challenge recommended that the council put in place an appropriate governance structure to oversee the multiple changes and challenges relating to the education service. In the intervening period, the education service has transferred into the People Directorate. The Cabinet and Corporate Board recognise that the education service needs further development and, crucially, to be better integrated into the council as a whole. Crucial to this is the appointment of a new Assistant Director, which is imminent.

The peer team asked whether the council had considered a peer review around education, to hold a mirror up to the service and help convey 'what good looks like'

elsewhere. The council indicated that external assistance and perspectives around the challenge being faced would have a valuable role to play in addressing it. The senior leadership politically and managerially highlighted that everybody in the service needs to be clear on the vision and future direction.

A further corporate peer challenge recommendation related to the council reviewing the capital programme. The council reflected that the global and national context of the last few months has seen the position in relation to the delivery of capital projects change significantly. This includes the inflationary impact on the cost of schemes and increasing capacity pressures both within the council's own specialist workforce and within the wider industry.

The council has top-sliced £15m from the existing Capital Investment Fund to cover the inflationary costs of existing schemes that it is crucial to ensure the completion of. There will need to be other projects paused or cancelled, however, and there are obviously sensitivities around this that will need to be carefully considered in making decisions.

The peer team asked if there were discussions taking place with district and borough council partners around the implications for localities of changes that may be made to the capital programme. The council responded by indicating that the potential impacts are being considered as prioritisation thinking develops and that discussions have been taking place. The expectations of partners aren't necessarily reducing and there also appears to be a view sometimes that the county council could be looked at to support other organisations' schemes which may be proving difficult to sustain as a result of pressures on capital funding across partners.

The council also recognises that there is the potential to secure revenue savings either through ensuring a capital project is delivered or by pausing or cancelling it. These considerations, which would benefit the budget situation, need to be weighed up carefully alongside those around impacts on localities of schemes being slowed or cancelled.

The peer team asked if there may be government money made available for schemes which there may now be difficult in delivering. This is unclear but what is

clear is that those schemes which represent an imperative to deliver may need to see their plans adapted in some way.

For future capital projects, the council has established a gateway for proposals. It is tendering for support to develop a longer-term infrastructure strategy, with this process having commenced last month.

Governance and Culture

One of the corporate peer challenge recommendations concerned providing a clear outline of the expectations on staff and teams in relation to the 'return to the workplace' as the pandemic eases. The council has rolled out hybrid working for all teams and has also outlined the expectations on staff. It has reconfigured the way office space in Shire Hall is used and run a series of showcases for staff on the new facilities and use of hybrid technology. An increased office presence is being seen as a result and as staff themselves increasingly recognise the need to have a balance in where they work from, where options exist.

Corporate Board and Cabinet are considering whether a minimum requirement should be developed around a physical presence in the workplace. The issue is one of precedent, convenience and how brilliantly the council sees most staff as having done, set against the need to come together to collaborate, share and maintain the sense of 'team' and 'One Council'. Another consideration is that of the cost of living, including the cost of heating the home relative to the transport costs associated with travelling to the workplace. There is recognition that all of this will require sensitive handling. The council has concerns around a small number of staff in relation to well-being issues around working from home and these situations are being carefully managed.

The corporate peer challenge recommended exploring a more distributed political leadership. The council has taken this consideration seriously and responded by developing a wider range of cross-party elected member working groups looking at home to school transport, disparities in education and devolution. A range of benefits are being realised through this approach, including the council harnessing people's skills and experiences and councillors developing wider and more detailed knowledge and understanding of the challenges the county and the council are

facing. The approach increases engagement, aids greater consideration of the implications of council decisions and is developing councillors' understanding of how wider local government works.

In a similar vein, the council has developed a cross-council officer group for 'Levelling-Up' as a pilot for developing increased place-based working across Warwickshire. This is a direct response to the corporate peer challenge recommendation to develop cross-organisational working below the level of Assistant Director.

The council has commissioned external support to review and refresh its leadership development programme, including the approach to managing performance. These are direct responses to the corporate peer challenge recommendations around reviewing the leadership development offer and ensuring a consistent approach to managing under-performance. The council also indicated that its capability policy has been scheduled for review. The peer team fed back that they saw the work done on refining the Target Operating Model under 'Best Warwickshire' as being very helpful and beneficial.

The corporate peer challenge recommended the council identify and implement ways for elected members to be kept more informed of progress in relation to casework matters they have raised with the authority. In response, the council has improved communication on highways matters with councillors via a dashboard and website.

Capacity for Improvement

The council continuing to drive forward the use of data and insight to inform decision-making and service improvement was a corporate peer challenge recommendation. So too was the development of an increasingly cross-partner approach to data use, particularly to inform targeted activity focused on communities with poorer outcomes. In response, the council indicated it has refreshed its Digital and Data Strategy and deployed the Local Government Association's data maturity analysis tool. It has also established the role of Chief Data Officer role, which is vested in the Strategic Director for Resources.

The council feels that the way in which it translates data into intelligence and insight and then utilises this has progressed considerably since the corporate peer challenge. As we have touched upon data is being used to inform the evidence base for the approach to 'Levelling-Up', with this data drawn from the county, district and hyper-local level. Data sharing via the 'Power BI' tool has also been developed for key partnership projects, including managing the impact of the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

The 'State of Warwickshire' business intelligence tool is shifting to being made available online as 'open source' data freely available to anybody. Data, intelligence and insight have a crucial role to play in informing the approach to the cost of living crisis and key opportunities around this exist with partners from health and the Department for Work and Pensions. The council indicated that investing more in this area will be difficult in a context of the budget pressures but recognises that the approach is proving very valuable. The peer team offered to share Buckinghamshire's experiences around the development of the approach to data sharing.

4. Moving forward and next steps

The council is proud of what it has delivered in response to the corporate peer challenge recommendations. It is also proud of the following:

- The Children and Families Legal Team being awarded the 'Lawyers in Local Government Team of the Year 2022'
- The Finance Team having been nominated for 'Team of the Year' in the 'Public Finance' awards
- The Chief Executive and Strategic Director for People having won the 'Chief Executive of the Year' and 'Corporate Director of the Year' awards respectively at the 'Municipal Journal' awards
- The council securing Arts Council 'National Portfolio Organisation' status in Nuneaton and Bedworth and North Warwickshire for funding around libraries


Moving forward, the council is very aware of the importance of responding to a range of challenges that are emerging or continuing. These include managing reforms around social care; addressing national policy changes, and developing local strategies in response, in areas such as education; and coping with the financial and demand pressures being faced – informed by the development of a refreshed Medium Term Financial Strategy to shape budget-setting in February.

Workforce challenges, including recruitment and retention, are increasing. Whilst the council generally has satisfied staff – with the flexibility around working arrangements that it offers providing a competitive advantage – it is facing increasing competition from other sectors and places. Pressures are particularly acute in highways, engineering, Planning and social care, with resulting impacts on users and the delivery of schemes.

School sufficiency is another key issue. Whilst there are seen to be enough school places now and into the future, there is a challenge in that they aren't necessarily in the right place geographically, relative to the way communities are growing and developing. This generates frustrations for parents and pupils and risks exacerbating home to school transport pressures and demands on the capital budget.

As the council faces up to the challenges that lie ahead, the political leadership indicated its determination to continue to seek to do the right thing and carve out a positive future for Warwickshire – to lead through the difficulties and make a positive difference – and maintain a sense of momentum even when having to defer or end things. The peer team posed the question how, in this context, the senior leadership, both politically and managerially, keeps itself resilient.

The response was maintaining the improvements that have been seen in the way members of the Cabinet and the Corporate Board work together – with constructive challenge, centred on respectfulness, being key. Members of the Cabinet “have each other's backs” and can draw on support and input from the wider political group. The Corporate Board have scheduled time every couple of months in order to take stock and are very watchful both of one another and of the wider managerial leadership team. Communications with the wider workforce have also been maintained, with positive, supportive and realistic messages to staff, including



emphasising the council's well-being support offer, and taking and answering questions in multiple forums.

The LGA would like to thank Warwickshire County Council for its engagement in both the corporate peer challenge and the progress review. We recognise that the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will want to reflect on the findings and how to utilise them to support the council's improvement journey.

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 for the West Midlands) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk