

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Harlow Council

27th to 29th November 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during late February and early March 2023 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

A Progress Review is an integral part of the corporate peer challenge process. Taking place and being reported on within 12 months of 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 Harlow 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 Harlow Council took place across the course of 36 hours spanning 27th to 29th November. It had a primary focus on the key findings from the original corporate peer challenge, under the following themes:

- Officer/member relationships at the senior level
- Cabinet working as a collective
- Wider Leadership Team integration and engagement in the leadership of the council
- External partner perceptions of the council

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

- Trevor Holden, Managing Director of Broadland District Council and South Norfolk Council
- Councillor William Nunn, Breckland District Council
- Michelle Howard, Director for Housing and Communities and Deputy Chief Executive, Melton Borough Council
- Gereint Stoneman, Head of Strategy, Warwickshire County Council
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met around 80 people within or linked to Harlow Council over the course of their time on site.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The findings from the corporate peer challenge in early 2023 could broadly be summarised as ensuring the opportunities for Harlow as a place are capitalised upon; establishing clear priorities and strategic direction for the council – with this founded upon a clear evidence base; addressing relationship issues across the political and managerial leadership of the authority; and looking outwards more. The following were some of the key findings:

- The council plans to develop a new Corporate Strategy (2024-2027), aligned with a refreshed Medium Term Financial Plan, by December this year
- Undertaking this provides the opportunity to develop a clear sense of priorities – achieving such prioritisation requires mature dialogue founded upon a clear evidence base and a willingness to explore ‘the art of the possible’
- People internally and externally talked with passion about the “massive” ambition, potential and opportunities for Harlow as a place
- Drawing this together into a vision and narrative of place that is jointly



developed, owned across all stakeholders and able to transcend any future political change, is an important next step

- External partners are seeing an increasing engagement from a council that is seen largely to have focused inwardly in recent years
- It is important for the council to consider how to respond to what is seen as the time being ripe for structural change at the Senior Management Board level
- The creation of the Assistant Director tier has injected energy and drive but the intention of enhancing strategic capacity and space through this has not yet been enabled
- There is an urgent requirement to re-set relationships across the political and managerial leadership of the council – mutual respect and trust are fundamental
- There needs to be a clear understanding at all levels of respective officer and elected member roles and responsibilities and the norms of the relationships between them
- The budget process in the new financial year is intended to be more joined up and inclusive in its approach and capitalise upon the knowledge and experience at Assistant Director level
- The ‘voice of the resident’ feels very quiet in the council’s considerations and the new community engagement strategy agreed last year can be helpful here
- Ensuring the findings from external reviews are consistently translated into action will increase confidence across the organisation that things are being made to happen and progress is taking place
- As the council looks to progress, looking outward more will enable the organisation to capitalise upon the learning of others and enhance self awareness and understanding

Nine months on from the corporate peer challenge, it is clear that there has been profound change achieved in many aspects of how the council operates and what it is delivering.

The urgent requirement to re-set relationships across the political and managerial leadership of the council has been responded to very positively by all concerned. Things have improved significantly and there is a very different feel to the way Cabinet and the Senior Management Board (SMB) interact. The work that has taken place widely across the organisation to develop understanding of the respective roles of elected members and officers; enhance insight to the council's decision-making processes; and to review the Scheme of Delegation has acted as a cornerstone of this improvement.

Cabinet and SMB are spending more time together, including their fortnightly Strategy Meetings, both as a collective and on a bilateral basis. Increased political stability and a 'united front' within the Cabinet and the wider Administration has been an important factor. Increased responsiveness has been seen from senior officers, including a greater openness and clearer outlining of options and avenues open to Cabinet as they seek to take forward their political priorities. People spoke of "trust and integrity" having been restored and the latent capacity that has been released by no longer "butting heads with one another". There are also seen to be enhanced relationships and better engagement both politically and managerially with the Opposition.

There were very positive reflections regarding the Leader, both from within the council and amongst partner organisations, since he assumed his role following the May elections. This feedback emphasised his focus; his ambition and determination to make things better for the place; and the way he engages. The Leader and Chief Executive, who is approaching a year in the role, have formed a good relationship and demonstrate a united front.

The appropriate time and resource needs to be dedicated in the coming months to continuing 'top team' development across the Cabinet and SMB. Development activity has been taking place at this level, through the likes of the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) plus links Cabinet members have made with other councils. The emphasis thus far has largely been on activities for individuals tapping into existing scheduled events and programmes and arranging informal engagements for themselves. This has brought the added benefit of the council being seen to be increasing its engagement with the wider local government sector. This includes forging closer links with Essex County Council between senior politicians; becoming more prominent within the LGA; forging links with councils leading other New Towns to share knowledge and learning; and involving the council in the North Essex Councils network for the first time.

All of this is positive and beneficial. We would recommend that such development, learning and engagement activity is supplemented by the establishment of tailored support for individual Cabinet members and a 'top team' development programme that works both with the Cabinet and SMB as individual collectives and jointly across the two. The LGA would be in a position to work with the council to establish such support.

The council has invested time and effort in establishing a range of building blocks that are key to the way it operates going forward:

- A regular residents' survey has been established, which responds to our feedback around the 'voice of the resident'
- There has been a return to undertaking a regular staff survey
- The Leader and Chief Executive have enhanced staff engagement. This has included the joint delivery of a series of 'roadshows' focusing on the themes of the council priorities for the current year and the Corporate Plan that is

emerging for 2024 to 2027. They have also provided video messages at various points in recent months.

- The council has worked with the LGA to develop a ‘corporate narrative’, the purpose of which is to explain and make sense of the council’s vision, values and mission to stakeholders internally and externally and unite people behind a common purpose and direction. This now sits at the heart of the new Corporate Plan.
- The training and development outlined earlier around respective officer and elected member roles and responsibilities and the decision-making process
- The council has determined a revised set of key performance indicators which it now publishes on a monthly basis – compared to previous quarterly reporting via Cabinet

A number of key ‘principles’ are becoming established through the work in developing these building blocks. One of these is decision-making in the council being evidence-based, along with a clear outlining of available options. Another, which links strongly to evidence-based decision-making, is being able to compare Harlow with elsewhere – centred upon benchmarking. This has seen the council make effective use of the ‘LG Inform’ data and performance information system which the LGA hosts on behalf of the sector. Innovatively, within this, the council has established a comparator ‘family group’ of councils leading New Towns.

Further development and embedding of key building blocks is required. Evidence-based decision-making can and should evolve further. Additionally, the council acknowledges that it needs to enhance corporately its approach to risk management. Also, we understand work is taking place refining the Constitution, including formally adopting the revised Scheme of Delegation and making a shift to the ‘Strong Leader’ model of governance.

The recent residents’ survey highlighted that the most important issues for local people are improving council services (96% of respondents felt this was important);

securing investment into Harlow (94% of respondents highlighted this); and restoring pride in Harlow (91% of respondents felt strongly about this). Tackling crime and antisocial behaviour was viewed as the main priority for the council (49% of respondents ranked this as their priority) followed by providing a range of housing (41% of respondents rated this as their number one issue).

In early June, following on very shortly from the elections, a day-long session took place jointly involving the new Cabinet and Leader and the SMB. This was externally facilitated through elected member peer and officer input from the LGA. The primary objectives of the day were to agree a set of corporate priorities for the remainder of 2023/24; determine the process and timeline for development of a new Corporate Plan and medium-term financial strategy (MTFS); and agree the ways of working and structures for decision-making.

The five priorities for this year which emerged from the session are clearly driving the organisation. They have seen the council inject additional resource in order to progress them. Monitoring and discussion of the progress being made forms a key element of the fortnightly Strategy Meetings of Cabinet and SMB. What is being delivered is making a tangible difference for residents. One example is a reduction of 73% so far in the backlog on housing repairs, with this expected to reach 90% by Christmas and the entire backlog to be cleared by the end of the financial year. Another is the work to renew 2,500 of the 3,000 much loved blue road name signs in Harlow, contrasting strongly with the 20 budgeted for each year previously. A third example is the commencement of work on all 11 house-building sites that the council committed to – with this on course to be achieved by Christmas rather than the original deadline of the end of March.

It is acknowledged by the council that the ‘five priorities approach’ can be seen to be acting as a ‘double-edged sword’. Whilst they are absolutely focusing minds, effort and attention, there is a risk that this is sometimes to the exclusion, on the part of both officers and Portfolio Holders, of other things that remain important. Similarly, whilst the approach being taken and what is being achieved are energising and

exciting staff and boosting morale, there is a risk of some feeling a little at the margins if they can't see an obvious link between their area of work and the current priorities.

There is also a key consideration around the five priorities in relation to the widespread recognition and acknowledgement that “nothing has stopped” within everything else the council is delivering. This is stretching the workforce further. Resource has not shifted from one place to another. Rather, it is being achieved on the basis of additional investment being made, thus raising a question of financial sustainability.

As we have touched on, a new Corporate Plan has been developed covering the period 2024 to 2027. This was set for adoption by Cabinet in late November, the day after our work in Harlow concluded. A Delivery Plan will be developed that underpins it, establishing targets, timescales, resources and accountabilities. Whilst there has been an increased alignment with the MTFs, this linkage feels very much at the outset and can and should evolve further.

The Corporate Plan contains six Missions. This can be seen to be the next step along from the five priorities, not just in number but also in establishing greater breadth and depth. This is demonstrated below, with the outlining of each Mission and, alongside that in brackets, the respective priority that it is evolving from:

- Mission 1: Transform Harlow's Housing (fix council housing)
- Mission 2: Renew our Neighbourhoods (restore pride in Harlow)
- Mission 3: Rebuild our Town (unchanged)
- Mission 4: Secure Investment for Harlow's Future (secure investment into Harlow)
- Mission 5: Protect our Communities (additional)
- Mission 6: Deliver High-Performing Council Services (improve council services)

The 'Protect our Communities' Mission is a direct response to the residents' survey, which highlighted the tackling of crime and antisocial behaviour as needing to be the main priority for the council, but goes beyond the community safety dimension and into the sphere of health and wellbeing as well.

The council is clear that the Corporate Plan will evolve over time rather than being fixed for the following three years. This would usefully see the 'place' focus broaden beyond what currently seems to be something that is largely centred on the town. A shift to more of a focus on outcomes for communities and a broader outlining of the evidence base that sits behind the Missions would also be beneficial.

Significant progress has been made in the council's relationship with HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd – the Local Authority Trading Company (LATCO) which it wholly owns. This has coincided with the arrival, in key senior housing-related roles in both organisations, of a small number of new people. As we outlined earlier, major progress has been made in the tackling by HTS of the backlog in housing repairs that they have seen build up in recent years. Given some of the personnel changes have seen interim arrangements established and a one-off financial injection has been provided by the council to help to address the repairs backlog, it is crucial that the progress that has been made in relationships and delivery is made sustainable.

Central to further progress by HTS and the council needs to be collaborative working and strategic approaches that ensure the challenges Harlow is facing in relation to its housing stock are fully understood, scoped and planned for. This crucially includes completion of the housing stock conditions survey that has now been embarked upon and gearing to meet the demands generated by the imminent introduction of new social housing regulation. Mapping out delivery plans for HTS that correspond with industry norms in terms of productivity levels and costs will be important in ensuring the council can reassure itself it is securing value for money from its LATCO. HTS and the council are working jointly to establish a new business plan for the former, with this planned to be ready in February 2024.

The Progress Review has reinforced for us the huge opportunities that Harlow has. In order to realise these, there is a shift to 'the more strategic' that needs to be made across the senior political and managerial leadership of the council. 'Place leadership' and the council's approach to partnership working are core elements of this.

'Discover Harlow' has emerged as a 'place narrative' and has been considered by the Harlow Growth Board, which comprises a range of key partners. Their feedback has indicated that further work is required to shift the narrative to being a vision and 'Prospectus' for place. Central to this needs to be an outlining of the unique selling point/s and opportunities that Harlow has to offer investors. It is also important that it becomes a vision for the whole area of Harlow, supplementing the current focus on the town. Once completed, there are ambitions to take the Prospectus to the UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum (REIIF) next year. This represents a positive example of the way in which the council is being encouraged by partners to "talk the place up" more – shifting away from what seems to have been a tendency over the years to hide Harlow's 'light under a bushel'.

Another shift to 'the more strategic' that needs to be made is the council entering into the partnership space at the sub/regional level much more. Positive steps have been made, as we have outlined, with the likes of North Essex Councils and Essex County Council. The council needs to do something similar in relation to its engagement with the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town growth and regeneration project. This project will deliver 23,000 new homes, including 16,000 within the next ten years, across five council areas, including the two county councils of Essex and Hertfordshire. It will deliver seven new villages to the north of Harlow. It is intended also to facilitate Harlow town centre enhancement and regeneration and provide new schools, additional jobs and an enhanced transport infrastructure.

This project represents a fundamental consideration for the council and the place that it serves and is integral to its future. The council acknowledges that there is work to

be done to determine the most appropriate way forward in its approach, given the feelings the project has generated in some part of the community. The move in the coming months to a Joint Committee for the Garden Town, comprising all five councils and operating by Consensus, is a significant step. This way of working will require the council to be clear on its stance and approach to the project and ensure its representation and involvement in relation to the Committee is absolutely appropriate.

The senior management restructure needs to come to a conclusion soon and this is certainly the council's intention. It is important to ensure that what is established provides the appropriate capacity to deliver the council and Harlow's agenda. Crucially, this requires the necessary expertise and experience to lead the 'place' agenda at the officer level. This, in turn, should enable the Chief Executive to focus on those aspects of the role, both internally and externally facing, that are most appropriate to fulfilling the council's agenda. The structure also needs to 'enable people to play to their strengths', recognising the imbalance that has existed within the SMB in recent times in terms of people's background and areas of expertise relative to the broad range of demands upon the council.

Assistant Directors are welcoming of the increasing opportunities that are emerging through the Wider Leadership Team (WLT) approach and are feeling more empowered. Progress has been made in facilitating their involvement in strategic issues facing Harlow and the council, with increasing space and time being created to support this. However, based on our discussions with them, there is scope for the WLT to contribute further and they need to continue to be invested in. An example would be facilitating their involvement in collectively shaping budget thinking linked to the drive to deliver council priorities and improve outcomes for local people. This is different to them having been given the opportunity to inform the development of budgets within their immediate sphere of responsibility. The WLT cohort would also welcome greater exposure to Cabinet as a collective and increased opportunities for engagement and decision-making with SMB.

Whilst opportunities are increasing for those at WLT level, there is seen to be a level of emerging talent below them which people are keen to see being enabled to grow and develop. People we met suggested a 'Future Leaders Programme' be developed for those below the WLT level, which could form a key part of the succession planning in the organisation that really needs to come more to the fore given the workforce profile and recruitment challenges.

The scope for the WLT to contribute more significantly to the development of the council's budget forms part of a wider consideration around the budget development process needing to evolve further to become more of a corporate endeavour with wider input much earlier. For example, whilst there has been good dialogue in recent weeks between individual Portfolio Holders and their respective Directors around budget options for 2024/25 within their immediate spheres, it is only on 11th December that the options will be seen collectively and 'in the round' by Cabinet. It is positive that, in a context of planning for 2024/25, the delivery of a balanced outturn for 2023/24 is seen to be on track.

Partners within and beyond Harlow, from across all sectors, are keen to see both the place and the organisation succeed. They want to help and have much to offer. A tangible example of what there is to play for can be seen in partners' perceptions regarding the 'Knife Angel' (the National Monument against violence and aggression) when it visited Harlow in September this year. Partners contrasted the approach locally with that undertaken in Colchester, which saw the council 'holding the ring' whilst facilitating extensive community involvement through partners. This example prompts a consideration of whether there may be some developmental work that could usefully be undertaken within the council, which has traditionally been looked at to deliver everything, around how it shifts to more of an enabling approach that taps into and realises the potential of partners.

Finally, we would just like to highlight that, in a council where tangible progress can so clearly be seen and so much is being achieved, it is important to celebrate the successes more.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The following are areas of focus that we would suggest the council has over the next six months in relation to our feedback:

- Deliver the senior management restructure
- Establish the Delivery Plan that will underpin the Corporate Plan
- Develop the place narrative vision and 'Prospectus' with partners and seek its adoption by Full Council
- Determine the stance towards the Garden Town based on an evidence-led approach
- Dedicate the appropriate time and resource to 'top team' development across Cabinet and the Senior Management Board

The LGA and the peer team would like to thank Harlow Council for undertaking the Progress Review. We appreciate that the senior managerial and political leadership will wish to reflect on the findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation can best 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 she can be reached via the following e-mail address – rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk