

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Cirencester Town Council

Corporate Peer Challenge: 2nd – 3rd November 2022

Progress Review: 11th October 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

Cirencester Town Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 2nd and 3rd November 2022 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC 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 Cirencester Town Council (CTC) 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 National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at CTC took place on 11th October 2023.

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

- What Works Well and Even Better If
- Effectiveness of Response to local need and delivering priorities and day to day services
- Advice and Recommendations to help shape the long term strategy

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

- Joseph Whelan, Town Clerk, Hertford Town Council - Town Clerk Peer
- Cllr Sue Baxter, Vice President NALC and Councillor at Bromsgrove District Council - Member Peer
- Kathryn Trant - Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met face to face in CTC over the course of one day with the following representatives from the Council:

- Andrew Tubb, Chief Executive Officer
- Cllr Sabrina Dixon, Chair of Council
- Staff Focus Group
- Town Councillor Focus Group
- Representatives of the Community Focus Group

3. Progress Review - Feedback

CTC has made good progress since the CPC took place in November 2022. The Council continues its award winning ways and only the evening before our revisit the Community Services Team won Market Team (Small Market) of the Year award at the National Association of British Market Authorities conference. This demonstrates the Council's continuing commitment to improvement, reflected to the peer team in the positive conversations and enthusiasm amongst staff and councillors alike.

The recommendations arising from the CPC have been progressed through an action plan which was shared with the peer team ahead of the progress review taking place, and which sets out in some detail the progress made by the Council against each of the original recommendations.

The peer team considered the Council's action plan along with the outcome of meetings held during the day and consequently shared the following comments and feedback with CTC in relation to the original recommendations.

Take a more visible leadership role to ensure expectations are met around the Neighbourhood Plan and Town Centre Masterplan – action on this

recommendation has progressed positively and town councillors are now more visibly involved with the Neighbourhood Plan and Masterplan process. The Memorandum of Agreement with the local planning authority is being reviewed and a town councillor is now the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group Chair. New councillors elected to the town council in May 2023 bring constructive challenge to the Neighbourhood Plan process as it continues, and the council should be congratulated on getting the Neighbourhood Plan to Regulation 14 stage.

Rebalance the focus between developing strategy and delivering outcomes – an operational review is taking place at CTC and at the time of the peer team revisit, recommendations arising from that review were being considered by the CEO and Deputy CEO so were not considered by the peer team. However, it is positive that preparation of a long term strategy has been deferred until the Neighbourhood Plan and Town Centre Masterplan are published as it will be critical that the long term strategy for the council references and links to both of these documents, both in terms of objectives for Cirencester and the resources required to deliver on the outcomes.

Improve external communications – the peer team heard strong evidence of improved external communications. The website is now being reviewed and updated in-house. Circulation of the monthly newsletter has increased, and it was referenced by all of the groups the peer team spoke to as a great success. The newsletter now serves as the basis for the council's social media and news communications and has resulted in an increased presence in the local newspapers. It is a great way of keeping residents informed and up to date on the progress of projects which also supports the recommendation on openness and transparency too.

Whilst the peer team heard that the language of the newsletter may be improved by being less corporate, perhaps the most significant comment shared with the peer team was from a new councillor elected in May 2023 who had previously thought the council was not good at communicating, but since being elected, appreciated that the council did communicate well, and there is a responsibility for residents and groups to engage.

Openness and transparency – the peer team heard positive comments from all of the groups regarding the council operating a committee system of governance from September 2023, in particular the opportunity for increased participation by the public was welcomed and there was general consensus that there would be increased transparency in decision making. The peer team recognise that the transition is taking place now and that it will bring challenges. Councillors that the peer team spoke to advised that support in respect of clarity of roles within the committee structure, including chairing skills, would be appreciated. The peer team heard that plans are being put in place for regular meetings between committee chairs and vice chairs with respective lead officers to facilitate better understanding of roles and responsibilities and to share communication and support.

Councillors referred to the information received as part of the Induction process following the election in May 2023, and in the spirit of transparency, referenced that a decision making flowchart and ‘who to contact’ information sheet would be helpful. Perhaps a review of the Induction process now that councillors have been in their role for a few months would be beneficial.

Be a listening council – the peer team heard of good progress against this recommendation. External surveys have been adapted to include opportunities for comment and a ‘you said – we did’ page published, demonstrating the council’s listening and active response. Survey response rates have increased. This is very positive and a difficult thing to do well.

Areas for further improvement in how the council undertakes consultations have already been identified for next year by plans to proactively attend markets and events to reach more of the community and promote the opportunity for the public to engage with the council and share their views. The peer team heard that events organised by the council are always appreciated and provide an opportunity for further engagement, however, the benefits need to be weighed against the resource implications for the council in arranging such events.

Internally, cross council communication has improved, and regular meetings are attended by representatives of each service area encouraging information sharing and opportunities to share resources.

Sharing responsibility – the peer team heard how the redelegation of responsibilities across senior management now allowed the CEO to operate within the strategy space. At the same time, it has presented opportunities for staff to develop in their role, for example, the Community Services Manager now leads on Business Briefings and the peer team heard that this had been well received within the business community.

Supporting community groups – the peer team view is that evidence of progress against this recommendation is probably the most challenging area to report because what the peer team heard was not consistent. Positive progress has been made, for example actions have taken place such as setting up a community network group, and practical support provided in various ways such as provision of storage accommodation and engaging and volunteering in a wide range of community projects. However, some representatives from the Community Focus Group referenced wanting more support and there were conflicting reports of town councillors' attendance. Community groups are very diverse and will work in different ways. Ensuring town councillors carry out their place leadership role and engage with the groups within their wards may help with lines of communication and clarity.

Governance structure review – the positive progress made in respect of reviewing the governance structure is reported above.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank CTC 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 and NALC are well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and would be happy to discuss this. Paul Clarke (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and his e-mail address is paul.clarke@local.gov.uk