

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Mid Devon District Council

20th December 2022

Feedback



1. Introduction	3
2. Summary of the approach.....	3
3. Progress Review - Feedback.....	4
4. Final thoughts and next steps	9

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during March 2022 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 six months after the council published the CPC action plan, 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 Mid Devon District Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month 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 Mid Devon District Council took place in person on 20th December 2022.

The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge.

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

Vic Allison	Chief Executive of Malvern Hills and Wychavon District Councils
Councillor Sarah Rouse	Malvern Hills District Council – Independent
Emily McGuinness	Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government

Association (LGA)

Kathryn Trant

Regional Advisor, LGA South West Team

The peer team met in person with senior members and officers from the council on 20th December 2022, including members of the Council’s Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee as well as the Leadership Team.

3. Progress Review – Feedback

Attached to this report at Appendix A is a report prepared by the council for consideration by members at their January 2023 Cabinet meeting. The report provides a considerable amount of detail setting out the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Corporate Peer Challenge. The team undertaking the Progress Review endorse the content of the attached report and therefore intend for this report to be considered in addition to the update report prepared by the council.

It is worth noting that even in the 9 months since the Corporate Peer Challenge was carried out, the local government landscape has changed – and continues to do so. Mid Devon District Council, as with the rest of the sector, is operating in a challenging context with costs increasing, income reducing and the realisation that ‘efficiencies’ are no longer necessarily able to address budget gaps. In addition to this, the council has cited a growing number of risks such as:

- Below inflation settlement
- Increase in homelessness numbers and the ongoing issues with the Homes for Ukrainian scheme
- Sustained pressures on recruitment and retention – the council currently has a vacancy rate of between 10 and 15%
- Housing Infrastructure Fund schemes at risk as the gap between budget and price becomes unmanageable

In undertaking this progress review, the team note that there has been significant

progress in all areas covered by the initial recommendations and that it is evident the council took the comments of the Peer Team, and the findings of the Corporate Peer Challenge seriously, using them to continue to drive organisational improvement. Members of the team commented that 'it feels like a different place'. The council has sufficient levels of self-awareness to note that continued improvement is needed in some areas, but the progress to date is encouraging, and as the attached report shows, the council is undertaking significant improvement activity across the board.

To mirror the update report prepared by the council, this report will consider each of the original recommendations in turn, providing any relevant commentary in addition to that provided at Appendix A.

Develop a stronger narrative for the place that encapsulates the wide range of projects and ambitions that you have for your place so that partners, stakeholders, and residents understand the council's vision – and the role they can play in delivering it.

The peer team noted that there has been a significant increase in focus and activity around internal and external communication and that impressively, there is corporate ownership of curating a comms narrative, avoiding the trap of assuming everything is the responsibility of the Communications Team. We heard that senior officers and members take an active role in informing and disseminating key messages and noted that the work undertaken by the council in preparation for UK Shared Prosperity Fund has helped focus minds on what is important for the council area and what ultimately, are the priorities for Mid Devon District Council.

We found members to have a greater appreciation, and sense of pride, in all that the council is doing well and that time is being given to celebrate successes – of which there been some notable ones including securing £280k from the Brownfield Land Fund to deliver modular social housing schemes, £2.8 million from Public Sector Decarbonisation to decarbonise leisure centres and the roll out of the 123 waste and recycling scheme which went live in October 2022.

The recently completed Resident's Survey saw a 17% increase in the number of residents feeling informed about the work of the council which is testament to the improvements that have been achieved since the Corporate Peer Challenge.

Use the mid-term re-set of the corporate plan as an opportunity to review

priorities in light of capacity constraints and ensure member/political ownership of both the process and the outcomes.

In making this recommendation, the peer team saw an opportunity for the council to reduce the number of existing priorities to better align with corporate capacity. The council considered this as part of a 'full cycle' of engagement with members; from Cabinet to each of the policy development groups and the scrutiny committee before returning to Cabinet. Whilst no activities were removed or reduced, pragmatic conversations were had around emerging member priorities, and why there could be no further additions to the current plan which is positive in itself.

Proactively seek to engage your residents/communities in the re-set process, using the different communications channels you have begun to embed.

Given the increase in positive responses to the recent Resident's Survey, the team felt that this recommendation had been implemented to maximum impact and were pleased to note the progress made. The council is certainly putting in place sound foundations in order to continue to build community engagement and it will be important for energy and organisational commitment to be maintained.

Seek external support/advice to ensure a culture of respect between officers and members and between members so that you can realise your potential.

The council, supported by the regional LGA team, did seek external support to review and improve working relationships between all members and between senior officers and members. Those that attended the session were hugely appreciative of the opportunity to engage in a different forum and reflect on this aspect of organisational leadership. As a result of the session, positive moves forward have been taken, however, challenges remain. Not all members participated and it is now within the gift of the council as to how they chose to react to challenging behaviour over the coming months. It was encouraging to hear of plans for a comprehensive member induction post the upcoming elections in May 2023, and that this programme (again working with the regional LGA team) will include sessions on effective working relationships, engaging positively with the organisation and appropriate behaviours.

The elections to be held in May 2023 will be an important opportunity to capitalise on the learning from the past four years and build a 'one team' approach with a focus on delivering the best outcomes for residents.

Provide training and development to all members so that they make best use of existing democratic structures e.g., Scrutiny and Policy Development Groups to provide effective oversight of organisational performance AND positively influence policy and decision making – ensuring the best possible outcomes are delivered for residents.

We heard some positive experiences from members in terms of how Policy and Development Groups and Scrutiny had been used to engage a wide range of members in the current budget setting process. This is a tangible example that officers and members now have to show the value and impact that members can add through these mechanisms and is something to build and replicate moving forward.

We heard that there is agreement around ensuring committee chairs have the right skills and attributes to ensure maximum impact, and again were encouraged to note that thought is being given to reviewing both the processes for appointing committee chairs, and ongoing support for those undertaking these roles. Taking time to look at best practice in other councils will help inform thinking around these issues, especially in terms of the role of Scrutiny Committee Chair – a role that requires a distinct set of skills and bespoke support.

The council has recently appointed a new Corporate Performance Manager who is leading on a refresh of both performance and risk with a view to making reporting on these areas more accessible and relevant

Provide clarity as a priority to officers and members around your plans for hybrid working going forward – building on the successful approaches you have developed during the pandemic and reflecting the needs of all stakeholders in the ‘new normal’.

The peer team saw that clarity on hybrid working arrangements has been given to officers and that the benefits in terms of recruitment and retention in a challenging labour market of offering flexible working arrangements are recognised. However, there appears to be some misconceptions amongst certain members that current working practices are having a detrimental impact on service delivery, particularly in terms of responsiveness. It is important that decisions are evidence based and so the peer team suggest that further debate and discussion – led by data on customer satisfaction, responsiveness etc – is held on this matter to ensure that the needs and

expectations of all stakeholders are met.

Continue to play a visible and positive role in key regional and sub-regional partnerships – particularly Team Devon and the emerging County Deal.

Senior officers and members are continuing to play an active and visible role at the regional and sub-regional level, even taking into consideration the recalibrating of the Team Devon and County Deal work following government decisions. Through the Chief Executive, Mid Devon District Council is often called upon to present a district perspective on key national policy considerations by DLUCH as well as leading on the role of housing provision in various health and well being arenas.

Having a positive profile across the sector can only be of benefit to the council – and its residents and members and officers have clearly recognised this. There is always a balance to be struck between an internal and external focus, and whilst the senior leadership team at MDDC seem to have achieved this at present, it is something to be mindful of in the future.

Consider developing a MDDC Climate Change Action Plan to reflect the district's circumstances, to sit under the county umbrella plan.

The peer team were particularly impressed with progress made in this area. Since the CPC, the council hosted a 'State of the District Debate' that focused entirely on the role of MDDC in addressing the climate emergency locally. As a result of this, activities and priorities have been refined and clarified and there is much more clearly defined plan in place with a focus on Mid Devon.

Communicate the Action Plan you have developed to address the issues identified through the recent staff survey.

The Action plan developed after the staff survey was communicated to staff and positive steps have been taken to ensure the activities identified have been completed. The range of benefits that have been introduced such as reduced rate gym membership have been well received by staff and early steps to improve staff engagement through staff briefings held at different times of the day are now much more embedded.

The council is well sighted on the issues it is facing due to recruitment and retention issues – it has recently identified that there has been an increase in the number of

staff leaving within the first three years (62.5% of turnover is within the first three years of employment). The team heard that work has already started to try and understand why this is the case and we would suggest that benchmarking across the sector will help determine the extent of the problem and whether it is unique to MDDC or is evident across the sector.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Mid Devon District Council for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review.

Mid Devon District Council officers and members have a good relationship with the LGA's South West Regional Team and as such engage proactively with the on-going offer of support to councils.

Paul Clarke Principal Adviser is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association LGA paul.clarke@local.gov.uk