


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Rossendale Borough Council

10 August 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) between 16 and 18 November 2021 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the CPC 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:

- Discuss progress made to date against the recommendations including early impact and learning
- Consider peer's reflections on this progress
- Provide space to discuss current opportunities and challenges including any significant changes in context since the peer team were on site and any further support needs.

The LGA would like to thank Rossendale Borough Council for their commitment to sector led improvement.

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at Rossendale Borough Council took place remotely on 10 August 2022 and focussed on the recommendations from the CPC, under the following themes:

- Corporate and place-based prioritisation
- Climate Change
- Governance/Commercialisation

A copy of the original CPC report, including the recommendations and action plan, can be found via this link on the council's website: [LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan](#)

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

- Sir Stephen Houghton, Leader, Barnsley Council
- Jason Gooding, Chief Executive, Carlisle City Council
- Cindy Lowthian, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met virtually via MS Teams over the course of 2.5 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Councillor Alyson Barnes, Leader, Rossendale Borough Council
- Neil Shaw, Chief Executive, Rossendale Borough Council
- Councillor David Foxcroft, Leader of the Conservative Group, Rossendale Borough Council.

In preparation for the progress review, the council provided peers with a short position statement and an updated action plan which detailed the progress made against each recommendation. This helped to provide a focus for discussions.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Following the CPC in November 2021, the council agreed and published the report alongside an action plan. An updated CPC action plan was shared with peers in advance of the progress review, this helped demonstrate the council's commitment to implementing the CPC's recommendations and the progress that has already been made.

Out of the 13 key recommendations made by the peer team, most are either complete or are 'on-going'. The council is clear on those areas of the action plan which require further work. These include two recommendations which have been highlighted as being more challenging to implement (relating to tourism and commercialisation). Peers shared their reflections on these areas which are outlined below.

The progress review also considered some of the changes within the local and national operating context since the peer team were on site. Peers were able to share some insights and reflections on these whilst discussing the implementation of the CPC recommendations. These include increased inflation, the cost-of-living crisis

and on-going recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The local election results in May saw the council move from a position of 'no overall control' to a majority, labour control. Peers heard how the council have worked with partners to develop a Round 2 Levelling Up fund bid. If successful, this funding has the potential to support significant economic growth projects for the borough.

Since the peer team were on site, the council have also published their first Annual Report to help provide information for local people on the work of the council.


3.1. Corporate and Place Based Prioritisation

The peer team considered the following CPC recommendations under this theme (as numbered in the council's action plan):

- A1 Develop a clearer, shared narrative about Rossendale as a place, its future and the council's role within this
- A2 Prioritise partnership engagement and activity to focus on the things that can have the greatest impact
- A3 Work with partners to bring a renewed focus and thinking on tourism within Rossendale
- A4 Consider how to build more corporate capacity to fulfil ambitions
- A5 Consider how best the council can set out and deliver its strategic housing ambitions for Rossendale in support of the new Local Plan
- A6 Develop a strategic communications plan including how the council can make best use of social media channels to engage audiences and promote the work of the council.

The council's action plan shows how most of the recommendations within this theme are completed or are 'on-going'.

Work to develop a shared narrative about Rossendale began earlier this year through stakeholder engagement. Establishing a strong, confident and realistic story of Rossendale as a place will be key to helping further strengthen partnership working around strategic priorities and programmes. Peers heard how the strong sense of



community and identity within each of Rossendale's collection of towns has made building a single, shared and coherent narrative for the whole borough more challenging. The council should continue with this work as it is uniquely placed to take the lead in this. Peers shared their views on the importance of the place narrative focussing on the positives and huge potential of Rossendale as a place. Peers were pleased to hear how the strong engagement and partnership working taking place through the Rossendale Levelling Up Board is helping to further develop this shared narrative for the borough.

Peers shared their thoughts on how the narrative might be used to engage staff across the organisation and help drive practical work, on the ground, to help bring the narrative to life. Peers also explored how the council might use this shared narrative to drive decision making across the council.

Peers heard how the council have prioritised partnership engagement to focus on areas with the greatest impact, including how the council works with the Levelling Up Board. Work with partners to deliver the Rossendale Health Strategy, including Rossendale Leisure Trust, has also been an area of particular focus in 2022.

The Council updated peers on work undertaken to re-examine the capacity of its corporate functions. This has led to an additional accountancy role and more emphasis on strengthening the Planning function, with changes to some roles and reorganisation of some elements of the service. On-going challenges associated with recruitment (particularly in planning and housing) and the need to balance investment in core functions and investment in frontline services were discussed.

Peers explored with the council if there are any opportunities to work with district neighbours to address some of these on-going capacity issues and it is clear that the council are open to this. On-going work with frontline staff to build an understanding of the Rossendale narrative, future vision and values also has the potential to strengthen a sense of common purpose and loyalty towards the council, which may support recruitment and retention of staff. Peers also heard how the council's levelling up bid has factored in some project management costs to reduce what may have been otherwise unaccounted for demands on its corporate functions.

The CPC had recommended that the council work with partners to bring a renewed focus and thinking on tourism within Rossendale. Peers heard how, whilst some work

has been undertaken and there are signs that tourism is recovering well from the pandemic, this recommendation has not yet been fully implemented due to capacity issues. As outlined in the original CPC report, there had been a strong energy and willingness from partners to work with the council on this. The meeting considered how the Levelling Up Bid, if successful, has a number of themes which will support this recommendation.

Work is progressing to develop a new Housing Strategy for the Borough including involvement of the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Strategy should be finalised in the Autumn.

Whilst the council have chosen not to develop a specific 'written' communications plan, work has been undertaken to agree a clear set of priorities for its communications provider. This includes quarterly media campaigns and a renewed focus on the use of social media channels to engage residents including work on climate change.

3.2. Climate Change

The peer team considered the following CPC recommendations under this theme (as numbered in the council's action plan):

- B1 Strengthen climate change leadership at all levels of the organisation
- B2 Ensure climate action initiatives are co-designed and co-created working alongside local communities

Peers were pleased to hear how the council has progressed the recommendations relating to climate action. This progress includes integration of climate change actions into job descriptions and appraisal objectives (where relevant). It also includes the appointment of climate change champions in each service area. The council have also included commentary on carbon impact as part of committee report templates (under policy considerations).

Work to ensure climate action is co-designed working alongside communities is ongoing including the launch of a Climate Network using social media. The council are particularly proud of their progress with the tree planting scheme which involves

the planting of 8,250 new trees as part of a new Rossendale Forest. Peers explored how the £1m Carbon Reduction Capital Fund has progressed and encouraged the council to continue to use this to set clearly defined targets for carbon reduction.

3.3. Governance/Commercialisation

Peers considered the following CPC recommendations under this theme (as numbered in the council's action plan):

- A6 The council should continue to prioritise work with the auditors to ensure closure of accounts from 2017/18 onwards
- C1 Agree what developing a commercial approach means for the council in the short, medium and longer term
- C2 Accelerate the Property Asset Review
- A7 Review the council's approach to councillor queries to ensure greater consistency in response across services
- A8 Review the scrutiny function to ensure it has maximum impact

The council has prioritised work with auditors to close accounts from 2017/18 onwards. Peers were pleased to hear that the council have very recently received confirmation of the closure of accounts for 2017/18. Work will now focus on the closure of accounts from 2018/19 onwards.

The CPC recommendations relating to the review of scrutiny and councillor queries has also progressed. The council's action plan evidences a number of specific actions that have been implemented including work to develop pre-decision scrutiny. Peers heard how the council had very recently received the first 'call in' in 12 years and the leadership is keen to also use this as a test of how this mechanism is working. The meeting considered the need for ongoing development and training for councillors on scrutiny, particularly in relation to key policy areas such as housing.

The CPC recommendation relating to defining and agreeing what a commercial approach means for the council, has not yet progressed. Peers heard how the council have preferred instead to harness opportunities when they arise to generate income and identify potential savings. The council remains open and willing to

consider new ways of working to generate income and achieve efficiencies. Peers explored how organisational culture and values link to the council's aspirations to achieve savings and generate income. As outlined in the original CPC report, building a commercial ethos across the workforce through staff development and engagement will be key.

Peers also discussed the current financial challenges facing the council including the on-going impact of the East Lancashire Empty Homes project. The LGA has agreed to undertake further work with the council on the current financial position.

The council's work on the asset review is progressing. An additional resource has been allocated to the team to further accelerate the review. Peers heard how this work is detailed and wide reaching, with a review of one ward generating over 82 operational actions. The council should continue this work to accelerate this review as outlined in the original CPC.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Rossendale Borough Council for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review.

The council's senior member and officer leadership will want to reflect on this note when considering how the organisation wishes to take things forward. In line with the approach to the CPC report itself and in the spirit of openness and transparency, the council are asked to publish this note

As discussed at the progress review, 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.

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