

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Staffordshire Moorlands District
Council

5th November 2024

Feedback



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1. Introduction

The Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during February 2024 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 ten months after the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the Council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the early progress made by the Council against the CPC recommendations and the Alliance's CPC Joint Action Plan.
- 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 Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC) 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 SMDC took place (onsite) on 5th November 2024 and focussed on each of the recommendations from the CPC.

For this Progress Review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- **Rob Barlow** - Joint Chief Executive of Boston BC, East Lindsey DC, and South Holland DC
- **Cllr Alan Rhodes** – Labour peer, Cabinet Member for Corporate & Financial Services, Bassetlaw DC
- **Cllr Georgina Hill** – Independent peer, Northumberland CC and LGA Regional lead peer for the North East and Yorkshire and Humber

- **Jamie Sutterby** - Director of People and Communities, South Norfolk DC, and Broadland Council
- **James Millington** - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The peer team welcomed the opportunity to return to SMDC to see the progress made by the Alliance in meeting the recommendations from the original CPC.


In preparation the Alliance provided the peer team with supporting evidence which included a Joint Action Plan detailing progress against each of the CPC recommendations. Overall the peer team were impressed at the level of progress against most of the recommendations made since the CPC and noted the detailed and methodical approach taken by the Council for making improvements.

Through the Progress Review, and recognising that it has only been 9 months since the CPC, the peer team saw how the Council has accepted and moved forward making good progress. The overriding impression from the peer team remains that from the CPC in February 2024 - that the Alliance continues to be impressive and effective – and it is utilising the ethos of sector led improvement to support its continuing improvement journey.

The following is the peer team's feedback on each of the 8 CPC recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The peer team consider that there is benefit in more clearly articulating a shared ambition for the future of the Alliance – through an overarching plan - to understand the risks and benefits of the partnership.

The Alliance is well established and HPBC and SMDC are ambitious and delivering




impressive outcomes locally. Through this recommendation the peer team were keen to ensure the very positive relationships formed as part of the Alliance between the councils were further capitalised on, perhaps through the development of an overarching strategic plan. This may include the SMDC Cabinet and HPBC Executive working closer together and also exploring opportunities within joint scrutiny to create opportunities to work further across the councils.

Since the CPC the Alliance has reviewed the working arrangements with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations and a mapping exercise of sub-regional and regional bodies for engagement around shared priorities. In SMDC work is ongoing in the 'Staffs Moorlands Together' strategic partnership where it is reviewing its operating model and reviewing and agreeing its shared priorities. The Alliance has also implemented a biennial Place Survey process to inform the strategic planning processes.

The Alliance has developed a programme to review its governance and operations. This has commenced and once the new Concordat and joint governance arrangements have been agreed the Alliance will identify the shared areas and ambitions as part of the Alliance's Strategy.

The peer team spoke to Members and officers and reviewed current work. The peer team recognise that although there is more planned, the informal meetings where the councils are able to align their thoughts and knowledge are working well. The peer team were impressed with how the Alliance is approaching this: delivering the Joint Awaydays and establishing the joint Cabinet / Executive forum are good steps. However, these working arrangements will need to be considered in the context of the impact of future devolution (see recommendation 5).

Recommendation 2: There is a necessity through the digitisation programme and modernising the working environment to now pick up pace, and this will support the delivery of the council's ambitions.




The peer team heard from staff how the modernisation programme is being rolled out and the positive impact this is having. The peer team also observed the positive physical changes which are starting to happen in the Alliance's office accommodation and newly refurbished rooms. Staff were supportive of the changes to modernise the office space, agile working and use of technology which facilitates joint working. Officers the peer team spoke to appreciate the opportunity of working in a smarter and more agile way and the development of the work environment.

To further support the Alliance in strengthening its Organisational Development Strategy and associated transformation it launched the Alliance: Our Culture in May 2024. The purpose is to *“clearly define and articulate a shared culture and values of the Alliance (the way people think about and do things) to ensure a healthy, flexible and continuously improving organisation”*. This work is in progress and has already involved engagement with around 100 people across the Alliance, the Council Controlled Companies and Members. The peer team heard positive feedback on this including the workshops led by the CEX. The Alliance recognises that this culture change project is a medium term piece and that it will need to continue to focus on this.

Recommendation 3: The Alliance can continue developing the positive impact of Scrutiny. There may be further opportunities, particularly on some large topics, to pool the expertise across the Member base of the Alliance for undertaking joint scrutiny to expand the capacity and generate improved outcomes

Work to enhance the impact of scrutiny is being progressed and has included developing an approach to facilitate community engagement / involvement in scrutiny and identify ways in which the joint scrutiny arrangements could be expanded. The peer team heard how the Cabinet are keen to work constructively with scrutiny



colleagues to utilise the collective knowledge of Members across the Council, building on the positive experience from the joint scrutiny which considered the new leisure delivery model.


The Alliance recognised that the improvements in scrutiny can be used to support the delivery of positive outcomes for both councils. The peer team were impressed with the Alliance's self-awareness on the importance and value of scrutiny and their commitment to ensuring this is effective, that non-executive Members are able to play an active role and that Cabinet Members have the correct input into scrutiny too. The councils should continue to focus on how they can do this.

Recommendation 4: Council-controlled companies:

- 1. The planned Leisure LATCo should not lose the opportunity for wider benefits beyond the financial and support the Alliance's ambitions around culture and its health and wellbeing agenda.**
- 2. The Alliance should periodically review outside bodies to assure itself that these are operating effectively and delivering outcomes.**

When the peer team were onsite in February 2024 the Alliance was in the process of establishing its leisure company. The transfer of the operational management of the leisure service to Alliance Leisure Limited (ALL) was completed on 1st October. During the Progress Review the peer team met with colleagues who spoke about the wider benefits beyond the initial leisure offer and the important difference this will make to the future health and wellbeing of local communities.

In addressing the wider health and wellbeing agenda, the Alliance has been keen to take a collaborative approach to service delivery through: the appointment of shared Marketing & Communications and Health & Wellbeing officers to work across both ALL and the Alliance; securing funding to enable ALL to purchase new equipment associated with health and wellbeing programmes; and once the service and




associated support services are operating as required, further opportunities are to be identified. The peer team recognise that this is the start of the journey in implementing this recommendation around the new LATCo and would encourage the Alliance to continue to consider how it will maximise the benefits from this.

The Alliance has developed a programme to review the performance of the Council-controlled companies to ensure that they are operating effectively. For both the Alliance Environmental Services (AES) Commissioning Board and the Alliance Norse (AN) Commissioning Board this includes Member oversight with work being finalised to harmonise the Terms of Reference across the Alliance's Council-controlled companies. Additionally, Local Partnerships have been commissioned to undertake a strategic review which is underway and due to conclude at the end of the year. Following this, the Local Partnerships work will produce a revised approach to the frequency of the review of the Council-controlled Companies for the Alliance.

Recommendation 5: The peer team heard about the devolution changes which are happening locally now and into the future. It would be helpful for the top team to reflect and consider where the Alliance positions itself in response to devolution changes

In the February 2024 CPC the peer team referenced the position that that Alliance is in – with the councils sitting in different county areas – which is an important factor for the Alliance and its future relationships. Both councils continue to provide input into the different approaches to devolution in the two counties with the potential benefits to the Council in supporting delivery of its priorities set out in regular reports and briefings to Councillors.

The peer team are aware of the conversations which are regularly held across HPBC and SMDC to share the knowledge, appetite and perspectives around devolution. There is an acknowledgement of the changing future landscape and the councils are



in constant dialogue on this, including at the recent Alliance's Joint Executive awayday. Without knowing what the future will hold, the peer team agree that the councils are having the right conversations now to consider the future.


The peer team encourages the Alliance to consider its assets and companies and any long term decisions around ICT and other investments, in the context of any local reorganisation or future devolution.

Recommendation 6: Increase the pace of delivery with more robust project and programme governance: in the depots; in ICT; its office estate; in its assets; and in the climate change agenda so external funding bids and internal growth bids can be made by officers to understand more clearly the budgetary impacts. These projects will also support organisational culture change.

The peer team previously signalled the number of ambitious projects being delivered by the Alliance. This has continued to grow and includes its regeneration and climate change ambitions. In making this recommendation the peer team wanted to ensure the Alliance had the capacity, understanding and toolkit in place for staff to manage these initiatives.

The peer team have been impressed with how the Transformation Team have taken forward this recommendation and how this appears to have been positively received by colleagues. This includes the revised Performance Framework, refreshed Project Management Methodology and the Transformation Board providing important oversight. As the Project Management Methodology is embedded, the Alliance is also planning to revisit the value for money principles to ensure these align with project management requirements for business case development.

The refresh of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) as part of the 2025/26 budget setting process will incorporate costs of emerging projects. The Alliance is in the process of mapping the priority actions from Corporate and Borough Plans and



the Transformation programme to the budget and the MTFP will identify these in the financial forecasts.

The peer team heard a lot about ‘projects’ and to build on the Alliance’s approach further the team think there would be benefit in a defined and consistently understood clear ‘programme’ in place as this was not immediately evident. Further work to review and develop this programme expertise may be valuable to the Alliance.

Recommendation 7: The Alliance should ensure that capacity, including around transformation, is focused in the right places, with ongoing support in place for the CEX to deliver the change programme and the ambitions at pace.

Following the CPC, the Alliance has reviewed the resources to deliver the modernisation agenda. The peer team understand that capacity is often a challenge for councils but were encouraged to see that additional posts have been established. This investment in transformation staff with data analysis and digital knowledge is important and will help ensure the Alliance can drive improvement and maximise the impact.

In March 2024 the leadership and management arrangements for the Alliance were reviewed and revised. This led to the creation of an Executive Director (Community Services) and service team structures were also reviewed to now include additional leadership capacity. In doing this, the peer team recognise that there are new Heads of Service in housing and assets and a new Executive Director. There is an opportunity now for the Alliance to utilise these new external perspectives and this capacity and experience from elsewhere to deliver the change and transformation agenda.


Recommendation 8: Planning:

- 1. There is a need to urgently reflect on the local plan delivery at SMDC. The council has a commitment to building homes and the local plan should not be a barrier to it. This requires a degree of focus from Members and senior officers.**
- 2. Members of the SMDC planning committee would benefit from further training regarding the complexity of the role, the formal administrative process, and the need to consistently apply national and local policies, legislation, and case law.**

During the CPC in February 2025, performance issues around Planning were evident with challenge and difference between the officer and Member views on decision making. The peer team made this recommendation to support the Council to address its build out numbers through the Local Plan. The peer team encourage SMDC to continue to focus on this to address the challenges it is facing and to support the delivery of housing.

The Council has moved forward on this recommendation but the finalisation of the draft Growth Strategy was delayed due to the significant announcements around the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This has been paused whilst the Council evaluates the significance of the changes. However, work has progressed with The Local Plan Steering Group being re-established and developing a work programme; the Council is reviewing and strengthening relations with Homes England and local affordable housing providers; and on key sites an initial review has been completed so that this can be quickly picked up the context of the new NPPF in due course.

To support Members the Council has developed training and development for the Planning Application Committee with the first session held on 11th October. The peer team encourage SMDC and Members to keep this under review to ensure the



Committee is provided with the skills and support it requires.

3. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank SMDC 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 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) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk.