

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Hartlepool Borough Council

30 August 2023

Feedback



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## 1. Introduction

Hartlepool Borough Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during December 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 Hartlepool Borough 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 Hartlepool Borough Council (HBC) took place on 30 August 2023. The Progress Review was structured into two parts:

- Firstly, a series of fieldwork conversations with key individuals responsible for progressing elements of HBC's CPC recommendations, as well as several Peers holding telephone or video calls with their key counterparts at HBC.
- Subsequently, a Reflections Roundtable took place between the Peer Team and HBC's Leader, Leader of the Opposition and Executive Leadership Team. The facilitated conversation used HBC's CPC Action Plan to explore, reflect, and test progress to date in taking forward the CPC recommendations, challenges to implementation, and notable practice in doing so.

The Progress Review focused on each of the recommendations from the CPC, under the following theme headings:

### **Theme 1: Approach to place narrative, communications and communities**

- Develop a clear vision and narrative for the whole Borough of Hartlepool which all councillors, staff and partners can get behind, ensuring there is a clear link to strategies, plans and understanding of local community needs.
- Develop a centrally-led Communications, Engagement and Marketing Strategy, with a higher profile and an internal and external focus.

### **Theme 2: Internal Foundations for delivery**

- Refresh the organisational plan for HBC - setting out the next stage of the journey for the Council, linked to a clear approach to transformation and values.
- Review existing operational arrangements (e.g. structure and operating model).
- Revisit the Workforce Strategy to ensure it is fit for purpose.

### **Theme 3: Empowered political leadership**

- Invest further in Member development to support councillors in their Council and community leadership roles and to ensure the governance system functions efficiently and effectively. Consider the introduction of a ward budget for Councillors. Role model positive behaviours.
- Reconvene Group Leaders meetings to improve relationships and communications between political groups on strategic issues for the benefit of the Borough.

### **Theme 4: Financial sustainability, resource alignment and prioritisation**

- Strengthen longer-term financial sustainability by developing:
  - A longer-term Medium Term Financial Plan, including scenario analysis, to inform the development of a Financial Strategy
  - A Corporate Capital Strategy and Corporate Asset Management Plan
  - Review the approach to budget development to ensure greater ownership
  - A better understanding of HBC's appetite for risk across all its activities

- An organisational approach to service transformation, procurement and municipal enterprise supported by requisite skills and capacity to support delivery
- Develop an explicit level of prioritisation for the Capital Programme and selective approach to future funding bids based on how these link to the vision.

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

- Tracey Lee, Chief Executive, Plymouth City Council
- Cllr Craig Browne, Deputy Leader of Cheshire East Council
- Evonne Williams, former Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Derby City Council
- Chris Ashman, Director of Regeneration, Isle of Wight Council
- Dean Langton, Director of Finance, Blackburn with Darwen Council
- Sally Rowe, Executive Director Children's and Customer, Walsall Council
- Nathan Brewster, LGA Shadow Peer
- Frances Marshall, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

The Peer Team met in a hybrid format with HBC colleagues over the course of 30 August 2023 with approximately 34 representatives from the council.

This report provides a high-level summary of the Roundtable discussion and Peer Team's reflections based on the pre-engagement, fieldwork meetings, Reflections Roundtable and HBC provided pre-reading. The following summary is not intended as an exhaustive record of activity undertaken by HBC in response to the CPC.

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

**Overview:** Since the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in December 2022, significant activity has taken place across the breadth of Hartlepool Borough Council's (HBC) operations, including taking forward all the recommendations from its CPC. This has been against a backdrop of significant changes to HBC's operating environment. Notable developments include: a new Leader and refreshed political administration taking up office following the local elections, which resulted in a hung council; successfully hosting the international Tall Ships Race; the establishment of new Mayoral Development Corporation for Hartlepool; and securing £18.5m Levelling Up funding, to highlight a few but by no means exhaustive list.

The Peer Team commended HBC on its many successes, from securing the highest judgment in its Ofsted SEND inspection of Local Area Partnership, through to day-to-day delivery during points of acute capacity pressures. Peers were encouraged by the direction of travel set through HBC's CPC action plan, however also reflected on the significant degree of activity planned for Autumn 2023 and challenges this could cause in terms of delivery. To assist HBC in driving delivery of its aspirations, the Peer Team suggested HBC consider:

#### Approach to place narrative, communications and communities

- Ensuring the place vision for Hartlepool takes a long-term view (beyond 10 years), and is developed in 'true' partnership with partners and services.
- Accelerating plans for a single corporate approach to HBC's communications function to maximise use of resources, align messaging and enable the Council to speak with a stronger collective voice.

#### Internal Foundations for delivery

- Regularly reflect on when delivery at pace is a necessity, and when a more pragmatic approach is needed to reflect capacity to deliver.
- Continuing efforts to foster a culture where collective corporate ownership is widely understood beyond service and directorate responsibilities, and with greater distributed leadership across the Executive Leadership Team (ELT).
- Bringing forward the intelligence hub to drive organisational performance,

transformation, and identification of opportunities.

#### Empowered political leadership

- Ensuring there is strong cross-party engagement in the development of Hartlepool's strategic vision and refreshed Corporate Plan so that clear political direction drives collective ownership, prioritisation, and demand management.

#### Financial sustainability and resource alignment and prioritisation


- Develop a greater focus on delivering savings plan with three-year timeframe to support the medium-term financial position of the authority.

### **Theme 1: Approach to place narrative, communications and communities**

Vision and narrative for the whole Borough: The Peer Team heard how HBC had defined a clear route-map for developing a 10-year vision and narrative for the Borough. This approach would be grounded in partnership working and informed by rich data and insight. To date, a programme timeline had been established, stakeholder mapping undertaken, and a delivery partner secured. Autumn 2023 would see this work move into delivery phase.

The Peer Team endorsed HBC's approach of taking the time to get the foundations in place. Moving forwards, they encouraged the council to fully harness partner engagement and accelerate its plans to enrich data insight through an Intelligence Hub. This would help drive organisational performance, transformation, and identification of opportunities. Establishing a cross-partner working group could also help foster shared ownership of priorities across the whole borough and leverage place-based resources to collectively deliver them. The Peer Team suggested HBC develop a longer-term vision – covering a timespan of up to 20 or 30 years – and be clear what the vision would be used for. This clarity and longer timeframe would engender a more ambitious transformative vision for place. It would also enable alignment with other strategies, plans and funding to optimise resources across all partners.

Communications: The Peer Team heard that developing a Communications, Engagement and Marketing Strategy was work in progress and had not advanced as significantly as desired. Activity undertaken included Senior Management Team-wide



conversations about developing a centrally-led team, and the development of a Destination Marketing Plan. The Peer Team encouraged HBC to accelerate bringing about a single corporate approach to its communications function. By developing a single communications strategy, brand and joined-up approach this would support HBC to maximise use of resources, align messaging and speak with a stronger collective voice.


## **Theme 2: Internal Foundations for delivery**

Organisational Plan: The Peer Team heard that a range of activity to strengthen HBC's internal operations had been completed. This included: delegation of powers from Council to Policy committees, removal of Part 3: Delegation Scheme, conducted annual light-touch review of the Constitution, and introduction of a Workforce Strategy, and new Chief Officer structure. Autumn 2023 would see further activity with the launch of refreshed organisational values, review of performance and risk management frameworks, development of internal operating manual for the council, and launch of "Big Conversation" consultation to inform new Council Plan and strategies. The Peer Team endorsed a 5-year Council Plan timeframe and emphasised how it - and HBC's new values – presented a great opportunity to drive culture change and engender collective ownership. Whilst at an early stage, the Peer Team heard from staff that work to develop new organisational values had been well received.

Delivery: The Peer Team reflected on the array of successful delivery HBC should be proud of and celebrate. This included high profile activity such as delivery of the Tall Ships Race, Ofsted SEND judgement and national recognition for its Community Hubs. Equally important was the everyday service delivery at the same time as flexing to support priorities that require an organisational-wide effort. Peers encouraged HBC to consider what more could be done to ensure all staffs' efforts were recognised and celebrated, as staff did not always feel this was the case.

Workforce: With the new Chief Officer structure and Workforce Strategy in place, the Peer Team encouraged HBC to consider its next steps around organisational culture and capacity. The Peer Team heard there was further work to do to foster collective corporate ownership. Sharing responsibility for delivering corporate agendas across





the Executive Leadership Team would help foster this whole-council approach. As would getting all services to consider how they can help each other's services to reduce overall demand and funding pressures.

Capacity: There was a sense from everyone the Peer Team spoke with that prioritisation and stretched capacity remains challenging. This was reported to be increasingly impacting on staff, with the risk that the goodwill of the workforce is reaching its limits. HBC could benefit from reflecting on when delivering at pace is a necessity, and when a more pragmatic approach is required to reflect available capacity.

### **Theme 3: Empowered political leadership**

Decision making and member development: Measures have been taken to invest in elected Member development and strengthen timely decision making. This has included: reviewing committee delegations, consulting elected members on their learning aspirations, and refreshing the Member induction programme. Strengthening decision making nevertheless remains a work in progress. The Peer Team heard frustration - from elected members and officers - around low attendance at elected member development sessions, the quality of training, lack of clarity on mandatory training, and speed of implementing decisions. The Peer Team encouraged HBC to consider how to further address these issues, as uptake of councillor development, political buy-in, strategic direction will be key to HBC's success. HBC could benefit from a more extensive review of its constitution – and training on it - to identify further opportunities to strengthen decision making and enhance elected Members' understanding of it.

Strategic leadership: The Peer Team heard that the re-introduction of Political Group Leader meetings had been positively received. There was however more mixed feedback on the effectiveness of joint member – officer working. HBC may wish to consider investing in the development of its collective political and officer team to help strengthen relationships. This would also help ensure clear political direction drives the development of Hartlepool's strategic vision, refreshed Council Plan and associated prioritisation and demand management decisions that flow from this.

#### **Theme 4: Financial sustainability and resource alignment and prioritisation**

Longer-term financial sustainability: The Peer Team heard that significant strides had been made in implementing a longer-term approach to financial planning. A revised Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) had been agreed based around key themes, including commercialism, and with scenario planning illustrations. Other notable developments included: agreement of a Corporate Capital Strategy and Investment Programme, 'root & branch' review of Capital Programme conducted, Strategic Asset Management Plan prepared, and smooth operational transition with a new Director of Finance, IT and Digital in post and new Assistant Director recruited. Peers heard this suite of measures were having a positive impact but with further work is required to fully embed collective ownership and delivery across the organisation.

Whilst recognising HBC's success in setting a balanced budget within challenging financial circumstances, the Peer Team encouraged HBC to have a stronger focus on its medium-term financial outlook. Moving to a three year savings plan, and encouraging strong political engagement in HBC's medium term financial position (beyond just council tax setting) would be conducive to shaping the council's longer-term financial health.

Resource alignment and prioritisation: The Peer Team heard that several streams of activity were in train to increase capacity and align resources and prioritisation. This included: identification of £1m reserves for transformation, implementation of the Chief Officer structure, and plans to refresh the council's approach to procurement. The Peer Team commended HBC's open approach to learning from other authorities on transformation and associated governance. To fully realise the opportunity benefits from transformation, Peers encouraged HBC to carve out 'time to save time,' so that strategic transformation is prioritised as part of the day job. They also encouraged HBC to take a more detailed approach to strategic risk management to understanding those areas where HBC are willing to take risks, and those where not. This would drive informed prioritisation, use of existing capacity, and identification of single points of failure and success.



#### 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank HBC for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions 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.

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