

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Ipswich Borough Council

Friday 11th October 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2023 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 council's RAG rated CPC 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 Ipswich 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 Ipswich Borough Council took place onsite on 11th October 2024.

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

Vision and Place Leadership

- Recommendation 1 - Set a long-term vision for Ipswich, communicate your plans for the borough – consider a visioning event with stakeholders.
- Recommendation 2 - Develop internal and external communications strategies to clearly communicate what makes Ipswich great – what are the unique selling points?

- Recommendation 3 - Develop a community engagement strategy for residents and partners and stakeholders:
 - Listen to your communities.
 - Work with your key partners/stakeholders.
 - Learn from best practice within the council and from others.

Finance

- Recommendation 4 - Financial savings plans (not one offs) need to be developed, agreed and implemented at pace.

Transformation

- Recommendation 5 - Continue development of a realistic transformation programme which includes:
 - Clarity on the vision and objectives
 - Sufficient skills and resources
 - A clear corporate delivery framework

Strategic communications and engagement

- Recommendation 6 - Create opportunities to demonstrate to staff you value and listen to what they have to say. Through the refresh of the People strategy, look to best practice in the sector.

Governance

- Recommendation 7 - Review the constitution to consider removing Area Committees and ensure decision making processes enable the organisation to continue to be responsive and agile.

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

- Member Lead Peer: Cllr Richard Henry - Leader, Stevenage Borough Council (replaced Cllr Dr Beccy Cooper - Leader, Worthing Borough Council who was elected to parliament as an MP in June 2024 and therefore unable to take part in the progress review.)
- Lead Officer Peer: Jane Eaton - Chief Executive, Horsham District Council
- Peer Challenge Manager: Kirsty Human, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Overview

In the ten months since the CPC took place, Ipswich Borough Council (IBC) has experienced significant change. There were local elections in May 2024 which saw the Labour administration return their largest majority to date (38 out of 48), include an additional post to the Executive increasing it to ten members, appoint two new portfolio holders and appoint a new opposition Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The general election in July 2024 returned a Labour MP to the Ipswich constituency and a Conservative MP to the Central Suffolk and North Ipswich constituency. Both are new to parliament and there has been an opportunity to develop positive relationships with them as they take up positions on the Ipswich Vision and Town Deal Board.

Vacancies in the council's Corporate Management Team (CMT) have also been filled, with a new director of strategy and change appointed very recently, three new assistant directors in post with a further role currently at the recruitment stage. Of the six assistant director posts, one remains challenging to recruit to. Three attempts to recruit a new assistant director for governance have been unsuccessful and the post holder has postponed retirement to enable a fresh attempt at recruitment in 2025.

Out of the CPC's seven recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports 50 per cent of actions as complete and 50 per cent in progress.

Vision and Place Leadership

- Recommendation 1 - Set a long-term vision for Ipswich, communicate your plans for the borough – consider a visioning event with stakeholders.
- Recommendation 2 - Develop internal and external communications strategies to clearly communicate what makes Ipswich great – what are the unique selling points?
- Recommendation 3 - Develop a community engagement strategy for residents and partners and stakeholders:
 - Listen to your communities.
 - Work with your key partners/stakeholders.
 - Learn from best practice within the council and from others.

In addition to the political and officer changes, there has been a lot of movement within the partnership and anchor organisation space over the past ten months, which has impacted on the ability to make progress on these recommendations. With regard to the Ipswich Vision and Town Deal Board, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Suffolk, Chief Executive and Chair of Ipswich Central (BID) are all new in post. The LEP is no longer in place and the Principal and Chief Executive of Suffolk New College has joined the board.

IBC stood back to allow the new leaders to fully understand their own organisations before introducing the vision for Ipswich, and how each partner can be part of this coproduction. Progress is now being made with the council taking partners on a tour of the borough, to demonstrate the ambition and potential for growth in Ipswich. A new vision task group has been established and a place brand consultancy has been employed to help deliver a new brand and vision by spring 2025, engaging with partners, arts and culture organisations.

The council still has a huge regeneration programme in place, supported by a £25m Towns Deal grant. Given the programme risks, such as inflation, cost of development and viability, peers were impressed that only two of the original eight projects had been impacted. A sensible approach is being taken to request reallocation of funds

from the two closed projects (Paul's Silo and the Yacht Academy) to the greening project and town centre regeneration fund. Peers heard that 2025 will be an exciting year of delivery with spades in the ground on many projects including the Regent Theatre, pedestrian bridge, greening of the Cardinal route and public realm and housing developments across the town. Peers were confident in the councils' skills and ability to deliver inside the 2026 Towns Deal deadline.

The change in personnel within politics, anchor organisations and partners has enabled a line to be drawn under the previously perceived negative image being portrayed. There is a refreshed and increased focus on communications with partners across Ipswich to raise the profile and positive image of the place.

Communications leads in the anchor organisations are getting together monthly to discuss key events/issues. They commit to promoting each other's activities on their media channels. For example, the university will be leading on promoting graduation week shortly. The partners will also promote this with a link to their role. When the Christmas lights are switched on, the council will lead the promotion and community messaging and the other partners will again amplify the message with their own twist.

In March 2024 a new Communications Strategy was agreed by the Executive, which is now driving a refocussed approach to internal and external communications. Peers heard that monthly Senior Management Group meetings are enabling staff to receive timely information and to feed views and comments back up through the organisation. It is essential all managers are consistent in their application of this, given the changes the council is currently experiencing and the uncertainty some staff may be feeling.

A new more useable and navigable website is being launched next month. Internally, there is more recognition of the role communications can play and the impact of distinct channels on different audiences. Officers are looking more at digital channels to create the council's own narrative, rather than relying on traditional press releases. This is recognised as a step change for the council, resulting in a more proactive and nuanced approach to what is being said and to whom and which uses a narrative/common language that speaks to all the corporate priorities.

The Executive adopted a new Community Engagement Strategy in September 2024

alongside authorising a restructure of the community engagement and community safety function. The strategy outlines the framework IBC will work within to engage and consult with residents. It has been internally developed with the views of officers and members and peers encourage the council to take the new framework out to community groups to consult and engage them on their views of the new approach.

Implementation of the strategy will commence in April 2025. The community engagement team will support other services to engage better and give advice on this, but each service will be required to lead their own engagement based on the framework. There is an opportunity using the improved communications function to get the message out to communities that the council has a new approach to engagement and invite feedback from service users.

Finance

Recommendation 4 - Financial savings plans (not one offs) need to be developed, agreed and implemented at pace.

The political and officer leadership began conversations about bridging the financial gap in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) at the start of March 2024. Through a budget working group of portfolio holders and non-executive councillors, everyone was involved in reviewing the budget options. Savings were initially proposed by Heads of Service and taken forward to councillors by the Leadership Team. In September, the Executive agreed a package of measures which will deliver between £13m - £16m of savings over the next four years.

Many difficult decisions were made, including introducing charging for brown bins, something the administration really didn't want to do, even though IBC is the only district in Suffolk not currently charging. Officers forecast if 20 to 25 percent of residents subscribe, this will cover the cost of operation and provide a small surplus. This is a conservative estimate and there is every chance a larger surplus will actually be achieved.

Despite the concerted efforts of everyone to find the savings, there remains a financial gap of up to £10m in years two, three and four of the MTFP based on modelling options and projected income which the budget working group is starting to

review now. This is due to the continuing pressures caused by demand for statutory services and inflation impacts.

IBC is now in the mobilisation phase of delivering the 56 lines of savings from the budget report. Efforts are focusing on shifting the approach to ensure in-year savings are achieved. Peers recognised that many of the financial savings are transformative and included in the transformation programme. Peers understood there was no budget for transformation and if required it will challenge the councils' finances to the point a capitalisation direction may need to be applied. Peers supported the S151 officers view that this should be the very last resort.

Transformation

- Recommendation 5 - Continue development of a realistic transformation programme which includes:
 - Clarity on the vision and objectives
 - Sufficient skills and resources
 - A clear corporate delivery framework

The new director of strategy has focussed much of their attention on the Budget Delivery Plan known internally as "Project Primrose" since arriving in July. Undertaking a deep dive into the programme management office (PMO) to understand the vision and purpose, skills and resources and delivery structure. Following this a new delivery framework has been put in place, allocating lead project roles to assistant directors, rather than within the PMO to ensure strategic ownership of the programme.

The governance process has been strengthened with the launch of a primrose delivery group, chaired by the director of strategy, pulling in resource from across the council to support it. A primrose delivery oversight group has also been developed to provide political guidance, with the leader and deputy leader (also the portfolio holder) taking the lead on this.

IBC has a number of dashboards which are used for risk and performance reporting.

A review of how these dashboards are used to deliver change and manage performance is underway. Peers were supportive of this increased scrutiny particularly given so many of the financial savings are transformative and vital to the council's financial sustainability.

Peers also supported the officer view that a deep dive approach into the councils many policies and strategies would enable better alignment of the priorities and actions with 'Proud of Ipswich', the operating model and rimrose.

Strategic communications and engagement

- Recommendation 6 - Create opportunities to demonstrate to staff you value and listen to what they have to say. Through the refresh of the People strategy, look to best practice in the sector.

Balancing the council's budget and delivering on agreed savings proposals has been the priority, with the head of human resources focused on delivering the people aspects of the savings programme. A service restructure programme has begun which has put around 10 percent of staff at risk of redundancy and redeployment opportunities are actively being explored into vacant posts. Understandably this is unsettling for many staff and peers recognised it was a difficult time, but a challenge being experienced by many councils as the financial climate is requiring difficult decisions to be made.

As a result of the director of strategy post being filled, attention is being given to progressing a refresh of the People Strategy aligned to 'Proud of Ipswich' and the council values. Initial proposals around workforce engagement will be discussed in November at the manager away days before being shared with CMT, the unions and members before finalisation. The aim is to take a new strategy for approval to the Executive in March 2025.

In the meantime, IBC continues to review staff analytics including, vacancy rates, sickness absence, starters and leavers, and other recruitment challenges. All this data will be used to tell the workforce story within the new strategy.

Governance

- Recommendation 7 - Review the constitution to consider removing Area Committees and ensure decision making processes enable the organisation to continue to be responsive and agile.

IBC continue to monitor the council's constitution and the Constitution Working Group meets on an as needed basis to make amendments. On average this is two to three times per year.

A cross-party councillor working group reviewed the approach to community engagement. After looking externally at other councils and best practice in the field they concluded the Area Committees should be disbanded. The benefits of reviewing the ways in which communities are engaged outweighed the need to continue servicing committees which drew small public audiences. This was a difficult political decision not unanimously supported. The Area Committees will stop at the end of this municipal year.

Peers saw an opportunity to publicise the change of approach and suggested writing to community members who previously attended the Area Committees to advise of their removal but inviting them to suggest different ways to contribute. This would support the methodology of the new Community Engagement Strategy.

Further supporting the council's governance processes, the monitoring officer (MO) has delivered decision making training to support new and existing officers to understand the council's processes, report writing scheduling and delegations.

In an effort to improve communications to members, a monthly councillor newsletter is now being produced and sent via email to all members. The content is constantly reviewed and being improved based on feedback, but initial views have been positive.

Following the local elections in May 2024, a new opposition Scrutiny Committee Chair was appointed who has introduced more in-depth performance monitoring within portfolios, robust questioning and a more challenging scrutiny environment.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Ipswich Borough Council 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.

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