



IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

September 2024

Corporate Peer Challenge PROGRESS REVIEW

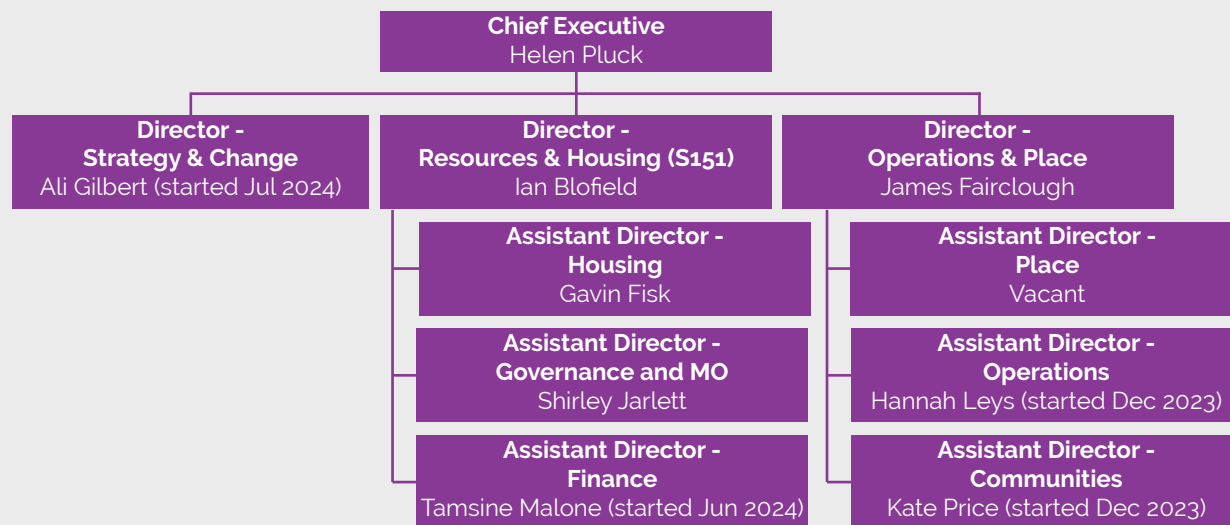


Introduction

In November 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) carried out a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) at Ipswich Borough Council (IBC). The LGA's report and the Council's action plan were considered by the Council's Executive in March 2024.

Changes since the CPC in November 2023

At the time of the CPC, the Council had a number of vacant posts within its Corporate Management Team. The current Corporate Management Team (CMT) Structure is as follows:



(A permanent Assistant Director of Place took up post in December 2023 and left the Council in June 2024. A recruitment exercise is now underway.)

While most posts are now filled some challenges remain.

- New Assistant Directors are getting to know their services and the Council. Some are experienced at working at a similar level in other organisations and for others their current role is a promotion / development post.
- Three attempts to appoint a new Assistant Director for Governance have been unsuccessful. The post holder has postponed their retirement to support the Council and is working part time. The Council intends to attempt permanent recruitment again in 2025.
- The Director for Strategy and Change is very new to the Council.

CMT's main focus since the adoption of the 2024-2028 Medium Term Financial Plan in February this year has been work to address the Council's considerable financial challenge and to build the Corporate Management Team and wider Senior Managers Group where nine Heads of Service have joined the Council on either a permanent or interim basis since the CPC in November. Like many other Councils we have also delivered local and national elections and as a result had a long period without Executive meetings (20th March to 16th July).

The Local Elections in May 2024, saw 17 seats contested (with one seat vacant following the death of Councillor Sophie Connelly, Portfolio Holder for Culture & Communities in January 2024) and changed the political make up to:

- Labour 38
- Conservative 7
- Liberal Democrat 3

Two new Portfolio Holders were appointed by the Leader of the Council – one to take the portfolio previously held by Councillor Sophie Connolly and one focused on Parks and Climate Change (moving these areas out of the Environment Portfolio). This means that the Executive, which continues to include a non-portfolio place for the leader of the opposition, is now made up of 10 councillors.

A new Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee has also been appointed. This is an Opposition councillor in line with custom at Ipswich Borough Council.

The Council is currently working through a Local Government Boundary Commission Review which is expected to be implemented via all out elections in 2026.

The General Election returned a Labour MP to the Ipswich Constituency and a Conservative MP to the Central Suffolk & North Ipswich Constituency. Both are new to Parliament meaning that some of the challenges experienced with the previous MPs have dissipated.

Both new MPs sit on the Ipswich Vision and Town Deal Board. There have been other changes to the Board:

- Helen Langton has retired from her role as Vice Chancellor of the University of Suffolk and has been replaced in September 2024 by Jenny Higham
- Sophie Alexander left her role as Chief Executive of Ipswich Central (the Business Improvement District) in April 2024 and has been replaced in July 2024 by Lee Walker. In addition the Chair of Ipswich Central, Terry Baxter has stepped down (to become Chair of Suffolk New College) and a new Chair is being recruited
- Alan Pease, the Principal and Chief Executive of Suffolk New College has joined the Board
- The Local Enterprise Partnership is no longer in place and Roseanne Wijnberg, its former Chief Executive is now interim Chief Operating Officer at the University of Suffolk (where Tim Greenacre has retired). Roseanne is the substitute for Jenny Higham on the Board.

Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

The Action Plan arising from the CPC is set out below with a RAG rating for progress at September 2024:

Ref	LGA recommendation	Portfolio Holder	Lead Officer	RAG
1	Set a long-term vision for Ipswich, communicate your plans for the borough – consider a visioning event with stakeholders.	Leader Deputy Leader	Director of Strategy	
2	Develop internal and external communications strategies to clearly communicate what makes Ipswich great – what are the unique selling points?	Leader	Director of Strategy	
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	Leader PH for Communities	Director of Strategy	
4	Financial savings plans (not one offs) need to be developed, agreed and implemented at pace.	PH for Resources and all Portfolio Holders	CMT	
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	Deputy Leader	Director of Strategy	
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.	Deputy Leader	Director of Strategy	
7	Review the constitution to consider removing Area Committees and ensure decision making processes enable the organisation to continue to be responsive and agile.	Leader PH for Communities	Director of Strategy	



Actions shown as the responsibility of the Director of Strategy have been led by the Chief Executive up to July with the exception of the Community Engagement Strategy which has been led by the Assistant Director, Communities, since April 2024.

6 The following sections set out in narrative form the progress made against each recommendation.

Recommendation 1 -

Set a long-term vision for Ipswich, communicate your plans for the borough – consider a visioning event with stakeholders.

For this recommendation to be successfully delivered the right circumstances need to be in place. It's necessary to ensure that all the town's big political and institutional voices are included and bought into the vision for it to be successful. As has been described in the previous section, there has been a significant amount of personnel and political change in Ipswich over the last six months, and delays caused by the General Election. However, progress has been and continues to be made and it's expected that a new vision, narrative and brand should be in place in the Spring.

Progress includes:

- A tour of the borough for partners held in March 2024 and repeated on a smaller scale for new personnel as needed ensuring common understanding of Ipswich.
- An Ipswich Vision task group led by the IBC Chief Executive on behalf of the Board to develop a clear, positive and coherent narrative and brand for the Borough. This work is being carried out with a place branding consultancy and will feed a visioning event early in 2025. It is anticipated that all partners will then adopt this in their work.
- Discussions with individual partners about the need to develop a Vision and how to achieve that in the context of a changed political landscape. There is no more personnel change expected in 2024 which will allow these discussions to coalesce into a plan for delivery in early 2025.



Recommendation 2 -

Develop internal and external communications strategies to clearly communicate what makes Ipswich great – what are the unique selling points?

Executive agreed a new [Communications Strategy](#) in March 2024 which is being used to drive the Council's communications activity both internally and externally.

Following the General Election and the political shift in the town, positive communication about Ipswich is easier but without the work being done on narrative / brand for the town (see progress against Recommendation 1) positive place-based communication is still being drowned out in many cases by negative responses.

Progress includes:

- Adoption of Communications Strategy covering internal and external communications.
- Use of Towns Fund to support development of [All About Ipswich](#) by Ipswich Central on behalf of the Ipswich Vision Partnership.
- Suffolk Public Sector Leaders agreeing that Suffolk should join and jointly fund with Norfolk a Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP).
- Launch of the [Invest Ipswich](#) brand at UKREiF in May and follow up events in Ipswich focusing on Ipswich as a place to invest and develop.
- A new Council website in the final stages of development supporting the Communications, Customer Access and Digital Strategies.
- Bringing the marketing function back in house and aligning it with the communications function to enable full service brand and reputation management.
- Arts, heritage and culture strategy under development as well as plans for a large scale bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a Heritage Action Zone project highlighting the town's rich heritage.

RAG RATING

(A communications Strategy has been adopted.)

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8 Recommendation 3 - Develop a community engagement strategy for residents and partners and stakeholders:

In September, Executive adopted a new [Community Engagement Strategy](#) and authorised the Chief Executive to restructure the Community Engagement (and Community Safety) function within the Council.

The Community Engagement Strategy has been informed by practice elsewhere, the views of ward councillors (via an Overview and Scrutiny task and finish group and an Administration working group) and the views of Portfolio Holders. There has been some resistance to change from some councillors. This has meant that the development of the Strategy has been internally focused and taken longer than anticipated.

However, the next stage is for an implementation plan to be developed by officers and the Portfolio Holder and this will enable more working with partners and stakeholders on joint engagement approaches that align with the Council's strategy and demonstrate an important role for councillors. It will also mean that the council will be able to engage with Ipswich's diverse communities about what forms of engagement would work best for them.



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RAG RATING

(a Community Engagement Strategy has been adopted.)

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

The current Medium Term Financial Plan was adopted by Council in February 2024. It included a General Fund budget gap of £17.5m.

In March, work began between senior councillors and officers to develop a Budget Delivery Plan which was adopted at the September Executive. [The Plan](#) includes over 50 savings proposals for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account. It is expected that this plan will deliver up to £16m savings for the General Fund.

A delivery programme is in place to ensure delivery with the first changes expected to be in place in October 2024 and the whole General Fund package to have been implemented (subject to necessary workforce consultations) before the end of March 2025 to ensure that savings are accrued for the full year in 2025/26.

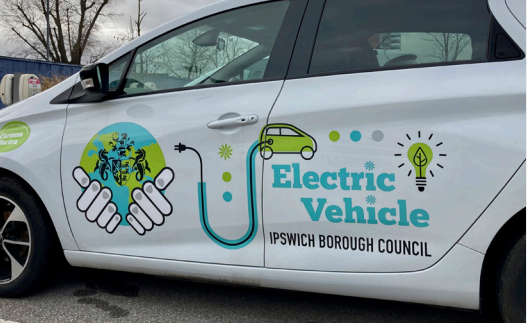
Unfortunately, the Council identified an additional £7m of pressures over the 4-year Medium Term Financial Plan period, during the first quarter of the current financial year. This additional savings target will be addressed through a second savings programme to be developed in the lead up to the Medium Term Financial Plan being submitted to Executive and Council in February 2025.

RAG RATING

(Financial savings plans are developed and agreed) and AMBER (arrangements are in place for implementation at pace but there has been insufficient time to implement to date.)

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10 **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 Council's Transformation Programme centres on delivery of its Strategic Framework set out in "Proud of Ipswich" and Operating Model. These were in place when the CPC took place and were included in the Council's position statement and supporting documentation but the absence of a Director of Strategy and Change meant that those interviewed on this matter found it hard to articulate the vision and objectives and the Head of Transformation who had only been in post for a matter of weeks was focused on addressing immediate issues in the Business Improvement Team.

Experience of IBC shows that both managers and the wider workforce prefer new ways of working and "transformation" to be incremental and embedded rather than big bang. The approach being taken fits this culture. Taking an alternative approach would be counter-productive and delay the changes required. Opportunities are taken to embed the required operating model into thinking and decision making. For example, all savings proposals were considered against the key elements of the operating model but without explicitly explaining that this was being done. This more subtle approach has worked well in Ipswich and enabled considerable change over a prolonged period of time.

A corporate delivery framework has been developed by the new Director of Strategy and is in the process of being implemented. This is being supported by a Programme Office approach.

Change skills are constantly being augmented through our learning and development programme, use of settings such as Senior Managers Group and Managers Away Days and participation in external learning. For example the Head of Transformation has become a member of the LGA Behaviour Change Leads Group and will be applying the Transformation Innovation Exchange self-assessment tool in the latter part of 2024/25 to support the Council's transformation journey. The Portfolio Holder for Transformation, has signed up to the LGA Leadership Essentials module on Transformation.

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(Development of the Transformation Programme is ongoing and is unlikely given the nature of local government to ever be complete.)

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.

The People Strategy is in development but has not progressed as quickly as we would like while the Director of Strategy post was vacant and the Head of Human Resources has been focused on the people aspects of the Savings Programme.

In September, the Director of Strategy has been given a brief to develop a new approach to workforce engagement to fit within the new People Strategy which is expected to be considered no later than March 2025 Council.

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(The People Strategy is still in development.)

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.

The Executive agreed in September 2024 to end Area Committees. This means that they will continue until the end of the current Municipal Year. A new approach to grant funding is under development and a new Community Engagement Strategy has been adopted in September 2024.

The Constitution is under constant review via the Constitution Working Group with the latest amendments agreed by [Council in March 2025](#). There continue to be no decisions which cannot be made in a timely manner.

RAG RATING

(Area Committees will end in March 2025 and the Constitution is kept under review.)

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