

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Calderdale Metropolitan Borough
Council

Thursday 30 November 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council (CMBC) undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) from 21 to 24 February 2023 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process. Typically 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 receive feedback on this, including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations.
- consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities/challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were onsite including any further support needs.
- discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank CMBC for its commitment to sector-led improvement and its honesty, openness and self-awareness throughout its discussions with the peer team. CMBC clearly has willingness and drive through its comprehensive action plan to progress the peer team's six key recommendations to full effect. This Progress Review is therefore just the next step in this ongoing, open and close relationship between CMBC, the LGA and its sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at CMBC took place on Thursday 30 November 2023 and focussed on each of the previous CPC's recommendations:

1. Bring your progressive practice with partners and apply it to your internal transformation.
2. Repurpose resources within the to ensure you have the capacity and expertise to step up a gear for the next phases of your ambition.
3. Ensure that you are making the most of your enabling services so they can support the council effectively in taking a whole council approach.
4. Choose wisely and build effective relationships with investors and developers.
5. Be confident and clear with West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) about Calderdale's strategic asks.
6. Prioritise your development of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) strategy in recognition of the impact on the council's priority to tackle inequalities.

The following original CPC team members were involved in this Progress Review:

- Member Peer – **Cllr. Eamonn O'Brien** (Leader of Bury Council)
- Chief Executive Peer – **Ali Griffin** (Chief Executive, London Councils)
- Senior Officer Peer – **Sam Mowbray** (Chief Executive Officer, Swindon Borough Council)
- Senior Officer Peer – **Helen Kemp** (Group Director of Business and Skills - Tees Valley Combined Authority)
- LGA Progress Review Manager – **Ernest Opuni** (Senior Regional Adviser)

The peer team met CMBC colleagues and stakeholders via a series of in-person meetings on the day.

The programme was comprehensive and was made up of eleven meetings, including:

- A one to one between the Leader of CMBC and the LGA Member Peer,
- A one to one between the Chief Executive of CMBC and the LGA Lead Peer,
- A scene setting meeting between CMBC and the LGA Peer Team,
- Individual meetings to focus on each of the recommendations in turn, and
- A meeting during which the LGA Peer team provided CMBC colleagues with its feedback from the day's meetings.

The team met with 23 people during the day.

3. Progress Review – Feedback

As well as the feedback below on each of its previous CPC main recommendations, the peer team had some higher-level, overall observations:

- The team was keen to put on record the clear and impressive progress Calderdale has made between the original CPC visit and this Progress Review. It is clear that CMBC has fully embraced all the messages from the CPC in February 2023 and used it fully in shaping this next phase of its ongoing journey. It is heartening for a peer challenge team to return to CMBC and be left in so little doubt that the work undertaken by the team has been so clearly valued by the .
- The refresh of the Vision for the borough to extend this to 2034 is a huge opportunity for Calderdale to align a number of key themes, priorities. and activity. The opportunity comes with an inbuilt challenge of how the council can ensure that its various ambitions complement rather than 'compete for airtime' with each other.
- The council's transformation ambitions are a major priority. The council understands that it needs to be clear about how it can most effectively balance

the 'cost' of what it wishes to deliver with a keen understanding of the 'value' that can be achieved. In a time where finance is a challenge for all councils, getting this balance may never have been more important than it is now.

- The interdependency of a number of CMBC's strategic ambitions provides an opportunity for them to align and be more effectively and efficiently achieved. For example, there are links between the council's own organisational transformation aims and the development of a VCS strategy for the borough which can help to jointly deliver the Vision 2034 ambitions for Calderdale. Also, Calderdale is strongly placed to utilise the commercial opportunities of culture and media; there is a link between how it embraces this in a way which contributes tangibly to WYCA's agenda for the Combined Authority.

In terms of more specific feedback about CMBC's response to each of the CPC recommendations, the team feeds back the following:

1. Bring your progressive practice with partners and apply it to your internal transformation.

- Make sure it really is a shared endeavour. It is easy to rely on the traditional enabler 'leads' to do this whilst everybody else focuses separately on 'doing the day job'. Governance and delivery need to ensure this is a truly broad based and shared enterprise.
- As CMBC develops its transformation programme, make sure it is keenly aligned to but not entirely driven by financial challenges. Finance is an essential component of this, but it is not solely about the finance. Nor are the finance and/or transformations team(s) on their own responsible for this. This can only be achieved if dealt with as a corporate objective.
- Question how departmental transformation links to organisational transformation - is there a risk of it not aligning? Transformation is most successful when it aligns with the existing values, behaviours and overall culture of the entity being transformed. Success can be assessed through the 'lived experience', both internally (with each other) and beyond (what it feels like for those external to the council when they work with CMBC). It is clearly in the current thinking of the organisation to keep it 'real' and ensure any transformation is true to the values and culture of CMBC. The team would encourage the council to keep an eye on that as the programme progresses.

2. Repurpose resources within the council to ensure you have the capacity and expertise to step up a gear for the next phases of your ambition.

- Get ahead of your Medium-Term Financial Plan - really think hard about the difficult decisions you may need to make and when you make them to get most benefit. The council remains in a sound position and has a good history of taking decisions which make Calderdale (as a place) and CMBC (as an

organisation) sustainable. However, as is the case for all local government at present, there are some tougher times ahead. The message from the team is to encourage CMBC to take some of those more challenging financial decisions now rather than delaying in favour of less painful measures in the shorter-term. Taking these decisions now will allow CMBC to be further forward and on the 'front foot' than if these decisions are postponed. This is likely to involve the council using its reserves with strategic intent rather than 'making do' for the present. How are some of the approaches to deploying resources going to be used to reduce demand to make CMBC more sustainable in the future? Doing this now will mean CMBC is more likely to be able to continue taking more of its past bold, brave and heartfelt decisions (for example, the investment in the Piece Hall and support for community organisations) in the future for the benefit of Calderdale.

- Is everyone clear about which services will have to be managed with limited resources and which will need additional prioritisation to deliver on Calderdale's priorities? This overarching consideration will be important in the current context of how all councils are operating. CMBC needs to ensure that there is a wider understanding of some of the challenges that it is grappling with, like all other councils. This understanding needs to be clear internally with Councillors and staff, as well as externally with residents and other stakeholders. It is important to state that CMBC is not facing some of the more extreme challenges that other councils are. Therefore, any communication needs to be both in context and in proportion to avoid unnecessary anxiety.
- Is your election cycle helping you or hindering you? There are some local boundary changes being considered in the short to medium-term. Might there be an opportunity for the council to consider whether the frequency of local elections (currently a system of electing by thirds) might also be considered as part of this area of local democracy work?
- Capital programme – does this represent a borrowing opportunity? The question the Peer Challenge team would leave with CMBC is to ask whether the council is maximising the possibilities of using this as a means of investment into the future.

3. Ensure that you are making the most of your enabling services so they can support the council effectively in taking a whole Council approach.

- It feels like there is a better prioritisation across the council which helps enabling services to do more meaningful work. The repurposing of the Head of Finance post, which has seen the creation and appointment of a new Director of Resources and Transformation role, has been clearly and widely welcomed by all at CMBC. This expanded Director role people, finance, digital and transformation under one directorate. The caveat on the positive response to the recent appointment to this role is to reiterate that delivering transformation is the role of all at the and not the sole responsibility of this one individual or team. 'Transformation' is in this Director's title, but it is everyone's job.

- Clarity on roles and responsibilities (enabling self-serve). Where are CMBC's expectations for self-serve? It will be important to clearly establish and agree what these are and use this clarity as the foundation upon which future investment decisions to maximise capacity and capability in this area can be made (for example, investment in IT).
- How does the design of the programme delivery ensure that you are taking a whole approach? The transformation programme is the bridge between the Vision 2034 on one side and the financial challenges facing all councils on the other. In some respects, this would bring together the themes of Vision 2034, financial challenge, and transformation as an interlinked 'trinity' rather than three separate entities. In all of this there is the opportunity to make the 'journey' more meaningful for Councillors and staff by creating a clear narrative about the interconnection between budget, transformation and the ambitions for Vision 2034.

4. Choose wisely and build effective relationships with investors and developers.


- Planning – the Local Plan has provided strength, secured greater credibility with developers, and makes CMBC clearer about its 'wants'. The team recognises the real step change and positive shift in this regard. The adoption of the Local Plan and resulting evidence of the more dynamic relationships with the private sector sends a clear and positive message that Calderdale is 'open for business'. The prominent involvement of Calderdale in the UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum (UKREiIF) is further evidence of this. The strength of leadership demonstrated by the new Leader of the council has resulted in a positive change in the tone and experience of working with Calderdale – it is clearer where the 'front door' is. This change is palpable, and the council has built credibility with developers because of the improvement in the turnaround times in Planning through proactive investment. The key message is that this principle needs to be recognised and retained as a key ingredient for future, sustainable success.
- Clear role of Further Education in supporting the vision for the place. This is another block of evidence in the narrative of Calderdale as a place which understands, and effectively utilises, principles which make partnership-working and collaboration achievable and successful in the borough.
- Commercial value of culture industries. As Calderdale's Year of Culture 2024 dawns, it is noticeable that the agenda is being embraced by Calderdale and is coming to the fore. The council has been very successful in securing significant external funding to bolster previously identified, locally sourced funding. There has been some exciting progress made at regional and national level in telling the Calderdale story. There appear to be very few limits to the potential for filming opportunities due to both the reputation of the location and the in-borough skills to support further film and TV productions. Key partners such as Dean Clough stand fully behind this exciting time and

the ambition to maximise the opportunity. Once again Calderdale has made significant and positive strides since the original Peer Challenge, and the only message from the team is that this vigour and drive is maintained.

- All strategies developing at the same time. Although the team has seen no evidence of this actually happening, it is important for CMBC to understand, be mindful of and manage the risk of divergence. This risk is always alive when so many initiatives and strategies are being developed and co-produced at the same time. This makes it more important for CMBC to integrate, amplify and avoid duplication wherever possible whilst all this work is happening and sometimes in parallel. How do they all come together for Calderdale as part of one narrative of place with CMBC playing a key role as a system leader? What can CMBC put in place to maintain alignment and avoid divergence? The can already evidence that it is doing this as demonstrated in the example of the Planning Team and Public Health Team coming together to co-design in order to avoid the development of multiple policies about the same thing. This approach provides a blueprint for replicable good practice.

5. Be confident and clear with West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) about Calderdale's strategic asks.

- Clear ownership of the WYCA space. It is palpable and clear Calderdale is at that table and ensuring it is being heard more prominently. Throughout the Peer Challenge Progress Review, the subject of CMBC working with the Combined Authority came up in a very natural way. CMBC has thought deeply and clearly about the interlink between the borough's objectives and the strategic priorities of the West Yorkshire Mayoral narrative and ambition. This degree of alignment was not present in the conversation in Calderdale in the same way during the CPC in February; this clearly represents evidence of progress and distance travelled in the intervening months. It is important that this emphasis continues to be nurtured and is maintained.
- Clearer alignment and articulation of priorities – Calderdale and WYCA. Strong mapping and interlink.... elevator pitch emerging. There is a maturity in the recognition by Calderdale that benefit for the Combined Authority area as a whole will benefit Calderdale even if investment is not directly or specifically being made into Calderdale. This is an approach which will no doubt be very much welcomed at the sub-regional level. The benefit into the future is that, as a recognised collaborative 'team player', future specific Calderdale asks (for example electrification of the rail network) could feel more like they are being pushed through an open door.
- Future proofing ahead of the next Mayoral term: As the Combined Authority matures, grows and possibly changes shape, might the relationships with its constituent parts also need to evolve and change? With this in mind, is Calderdale ready to be a key part of this change/evolution? The political leadership of Calderdale at that Combined Authority table via a dispersed model is proving effective as it creates capacity for CMBC to influence the



variety and plethora of different agendas relevant to WYCA. The Leader of Calderdale is proactively driving this collaborative approach to the WYCA arena - might there be more opportunity for the officers to do the same than is currently being utilised? As a positive conclusion on this, there is a clear enhancement of Calderdale's ambition beyond its own borders, and it is not limited to West Yorkshire but actually extends onto a national stage. The real credit to Calderdale is that it is not losing or compromising on its own values in these arenas but rather is taking these with it in these discussions. Being assured of your own values whilst working in partnership with others is not an easy balance to maintain. Nonetheless it is worth Calderdale focusing on preserving this approach into the future.

6. Prioritise your development of the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) strategy in recognition of the impact on tackling inequalities.

- Brave decision to do it 'right', not simply 'quickly'. Calderdale is to be commended for not rushing to simply produce a strategy to which it could quickly or easily point. Successful co-production happens when the focus is maintained on building relationships, hearing all voices, identifying shared space and understanding the value all parts bring.
- Recognise the strategy will not answer everything and will need to be woven onto the wider transformation work. It is a good way of framing thinking about principles (commissioning etc). However, it will not remove the need for difficult decisions being taken nor tough conversations being had. This is inevitable at a time when everyone is dealing with finite resources of all types (financial, human, skills etc). It will be important to be realistic about this as the conversations progress, as it is a key strand within a multifaceted, multi-dimensional and overarching transformation strategy. It will also be key for clear sequencing of considerations and the order in which different segments are considered, to ensure the good work and excellent relationships are protected and nurtured into the future.
- The sector is not homogenous. This needs to be reflected in how engagement and connectivity to the wider Vision 2034 plays out. And ensure all parts of the third sector can influence/contribute to this. It will be critical to recognise and honour the agency and sovereignty of the different organisations involved in this space. They have distinct ambitions and agendas which must be respected as each of these are equally as valid as the other. The team is confident that Calderdale as a place can do this successfully, provided it maintains a clear focus on protecting and preserving this principle.
- Use of ICS funding. It is really positive that this resource has been secured to deploy it in building capacity to develop the strategy. This is impressive and should not be underestimated.



4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank CMBC for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review and for full and comprehensive engagement with the process.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how CMBC wishes to progress things.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an ongoing 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 in this report and we would be happy to discuss this further.

Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser, is the main point of contact between CMBC and the LGA and his email address is mark.edgell@local.gov.uk.