

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Local Government Association

14th November 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction


The LGA commissioned a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) which took place between 6th – 9th December 2022. The LGA published the full report, with an action plan which was approved by the LGA Board on the 8th March 2023.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process, which takes place within twelve months of the CPC. It is designed to provide space for the senior leadership to discuss with peers the progress made against the recommendations from the original CPC. This includes the opportunity to discuss progress in light of any opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site'.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at the LGA took place on the 14th November 2023. For this progress review, the LGA were keen to invite back all members of the original CPC team, as follows:

- **Ali Griffin** (Chief Executive – London Councils).
- **Peter John OBE** (former Leader of the London Borough of Southwark)
- **Ian Hudspeth OBE** (former Leader of Oxfordshire County Council)
- **Baroness Dorothy Thornhill MBE** (House of Lords and former Elected Mayor of Watford Borough Council)
- **Cllr Jim McKenna** (Cornwall Council)
- **Andreas Kiefer** (former Secretary General - The Congress of the Council of Europe)
- **Charlotte Ramsden OBE** (Chief Executive – Bradford Children and Families Trust)
- Peer Challenge Manager – Dan Archer (Senior Regional Adviser - LGA)



The progress review considered each of the recommendations from the CPC, under the following theme headings:

- Relationship with Devolution
- Organisational Development
- Sector Improvement and Assurance
- Horizon Scanning and International Learning
- Member Development

This note provides a summary of the feedback given and the activity that followed the original CPC, presented under the above headings.

In summary, the peer team observed how the LGA has taken a number of steps to make progress against the recommendations from the original CPC which are covered in this note. The LGA is in a position to make further progress, which will require managing its current transitions well.

Developing common clarity on the current priorities will help with this, building on the recent member and officer leadership away-day. This can support the pace of progress, whilst longer term work – such as the forthcoming White Paper - is developed. This includes making clear, what is required to make the LGA the *‘best membership organisation it can be’*, what the LGA will do to make peer challenge and sector support increasingly robust and effective, as well as how the LGA can better utilise international learning.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Relationship with Devolution

This theme covers the following recommendation from the original CPC report:

- **Develop a closer working relationship with the Mayoral Combined Authorities and new county devolution areas as a key, growing part of the local government family.** This will mean ensuring greater oversight and prioritisation corporately of this shift and building in the corporate requirements of this.

Since the peer team were last onsite, the LGA has explored how it can work more collaboratively with Mayors and Combined Authorities, collectively and individually. An offer to Mayors collectively has been made, to develop a national ‘voice’ for devolution through a joint lobbying programme. The LGA Chair has liaised with leading LGA members with relevant experience to consider the best approach by which the Mayoral Combined Authorities can be engaged and get the best out of LGA membership. Whilst these discussions are ongoing and require agreement on both parts, it is important that the LGA prioritises an ongoing, active role in this.

The peer team heard how the LGA is now in a position to provide combined authorities with greater access to many of its sector support programmes – looking again at how much these support programmes are accessed, how visible this offer is and how active these discussions are, can help to further develop this relationship. This also includes considering the extent of support from the LGA for those in council leadership positions which involve a Mayor, Combined Authority or County Deal (for example).

The approach that the LGA takes, or doesn’t, in supporting councils who are developing local devolution deals may also be an area that the LGA wishes to consider more, in moving forward in this area. This has known potential risks around membership but can also create opportunities to grow involvement and engagement from an earlier stage. There may also be opportunities to look at the issues, rather than structures, where the sector would benefit from more devolved powers and

targeting LGA efforts around this. The LGA's relationship with devolution is an area in which the value of horizon scanning for what comes next is really important, given how quickly this landscape is changing across the sector.

Organisational Development

This theme covers the following recommendations from the original CPC report:

- **Use the LGA Business Plan and the priorities it sets for the organisation to more consistently shape financial and organisational planning at a strategic level.** Doing so in a way which can help to more closely align the capacity, development and resource requirements of meeting the key priorities of the LGA, whilst still remaining essentially adaptive to significant challenges and crises as they present themselves.
- **Ensure sufficient, dedicated senior capacity and structures are in place to deliver the LGA's internal change requirements fully.**
- **Agree and implement an internal change plan for closing the apparent gaps in day-to-day working between functions across the LGA, as appropriate.** Doing so can further strengthen the quality and timeliness of support provided to member councils, whilst also supporting the LGA to utilise and convene more real-time, real-world experiences in the LGA's policy development work.
- **Reaffirm to staff the commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and continue to provide the required internal leadership and resource requirements for this, building on the steps taken in the last 2 years.**
- **Implement the planned training and induction programme for all staff about working in a member-led environment at the LGA. Establish a member-officer protocol, specific to the LGA to help shape this.**
- **Reset the Audit Committee function** to ensure that this function is able to provide proactive oversight and challenge through a more active work

programme which is well connected into the work of other relevant boards. Refreshing the terms of reference, meeting frequency and number of members involved with the Audit Committee will aid in this regard.

Following the local elections in May, the LGA elected a new Chair and two new Group Leaders. The new political leadership has a focus on wanting the LGA *'be the best membership organisation we can be'*. The leadership have also indicated additional priorities for the LGA, which are being used to inform a refresh to the LGA Business Plan, which will go to the LGA Board in December.

Within the officer cohort, the LGA has also experienced significant change in recent months, with the Chief Executive leaving the LGA in October after eight years in the role. The recruitment process for a new Chief Executive was underway at the time of the progress review and the Deputy Chief Executive has taken on the role of Acting Chief Executive over this period. The LGA has also appointed the Director of Policy (People) to the role of Deputy Chief Executive and the Head of Corporate Services role has been added to the Senior Management Team since the original CPC, to provide a more consistent line of sight towards the corporate requirements of the LGA's overall business. Once the LGA has appointed a new Chief Executive, they will be able to review the structure and senior capacity required.

The new Deputy Chief Executive has been given the remit of leading on organisational transformation and preparedness for the future. A programme of work 'One LGA, One Voice' has been established to oversee existing and new change programmes, to bring corporate leadership, coherence and consistency to this work. The aim of this ultimately, is to support the LGA to be the 'best membership organisation it can be'. This work programme is at an early development stage and has been co-produced by a cross-LGA working group. This working group has representatives from across the LGA involved, who have a responsibility to engage with colleagues across their service areas, to then feed their perspectives in. This programme will continue to develop, including by incorporating the recommendations from the recent review of cross-LGA working that was conducted following the recommendation in the CPC.

To be most effective, 'One LGA, One Voice' needs to grow further into a holistic programme covering the different aspects of internal change work across the LGA. This includes the change requirements that come from defining what is required to be the *'best membership organisation the LGA can be'*. For example, part of this message is perceived to be about increasing the visibility of all LGA officers in councils – how else might this be structured into the LGA's change requirements and therefore the activity covered by this programme?

The work to refresh the Business Plan and set out the new set of priorities for the LGA has implications for the LGA's internal change programme. It is important that the programme, once more developed in this way, benefits from strong, visible and consistent leadership across the LGA. This will require a clear narrative that helps all to understand what this change programme will mean for the LGA once realised, the difference it will make to how the LGA operates, the benefits it will bring and the changing expectations of individuals to deliver it in full. The team would ask the LGA to reflect on whether the title 'One LGA, One Voice' is a clear reflection of what the programme seeks to achieve as an internal change programme and for example, whether this adequately reflects the different aspects of the LGA purpose – i.e. promote, support and improve.

Following the CPC, the LGA Board reaffirmed its commitment to the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and action plan, with this commitment recomunicated to staff following this and a set of key indicators adopted to monitor progress over time. The member and officer leadership at the LGA recognise that this is an area that must continue to be prioritised, with a lot more to do. This includes how this area is resourced on an ongoing basis and how the LGA communicates its EDI values externally. Since becoming Chair in July, the Chair has met with three of the five internal EDI networks, with plans to meet the others too, welcoming the healthy challenge this gives. Each of the Group Leaders are supportive of this too and wish to consider the role that they can take in helping the LGA to move forward.

To support officers in working well in a member-led environment, the LGA has now incorporated the involvement of the Political Group Offices in all staff inductions. Mandatory training on working in a politically-led organisation is now being delivered,

include separate sessions for senior and more junior staff. A member/officer working group has also been established, to review a draft member-officer protocol, which will be reported back to the LGA Board in December.

The peer team are pleased to see that following the CPC, the LGA has conducted a reset of the Audit Committee. This has led to a refreshed terms of reference and new membership – with all committee members required to have relevant audit or financial experience. Dedicated training for Committee members has been provided, which included meeting with the internal and external auditors. The team heard of a new energy around audit work now being in place which the LGA will benefit from. The Committee has been renamed the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee to reflect its new remit, which includes a programme of deep dives into specific risks and their mitigation strategies. The Committee Chair is invited to the LGA Board as necessary to provide updates. As part of its new terms of reference, there is a commitment to have an annual review of the effectiveness of the Committee. This is an important routine exercise, to help ensure the Committee continues to develop with the LGA.

Whilst not part of the key recommendations from the original CPC, the report did also encourage the LGA to expand the involvement of officers in the internal Commercial Ideas Lab, which has been done. The peer team were told how this had helped to provide more internal support and energy for this work.

Sector Improvement and Assurance

This theme covers the following recommendations from the original CPC report:

- **Lead the design of a reshaped sector support and assurance framework for local government, reflecting the different needs seen across the sector now.** Build and add to the strengths that already exist, with separate offers for ‘assurance’ and ‘improvement’, ensuring models and ways of working for those requiring a higher level of assurance are suitably utilised in the timeliest way possible.
- **Tighten the networks around sector support and assurance, including**

between the various professional bodies and work with the DLUHC and the emerging OFLOG in a way which leads to earlier support, challenge and sharing of best practice.

Since the peer team were onsite in December 2022, the LGA has mapped a draft improvement and assurance framework which was informed by input from a sounding board of SOLACE, CIPFA and LLG. A period of consultation with the sector and other stakeholders took place between May and August 2023 which led to a more comprehensive map of the framework. A further round of engagement to consider any areas for improvement or further support informed by different needs across the sector is due to take place between November 2023 and February 2024. This progress is welcomed by the peer team and examples were given to the team of the healthy discussions and challenge members and officers were able to have as a result of this, which had not taken place previously. Building on this, the focus of this next phase will include how councils can use their own checks and balances more effectively to enable earlier support and challenge. The LGA has the opportunity to provide thought leadership on local government improvement and assurance during this next phase of the work.

The need to further strengthen peer challenge, support, improvement and assurance offers has increased since the time of the last CPC. In light of the challenges in the sector, it is important to accelerate this work and the external visibility of the changes made and their impact.

More widely, the LGA has been able to respond to some of the learning from the challenges being faced in the sector by adding enhanced offers around finance and governance as well as a new development programme and curriculum for Chief Executives to the improvement and assurance offer for 2023/24.

Strengthening the peer challenge approach and the consistency of quality peer practice has a renewed urgency in light of the challenges currently presented, something that the Chair of the Improvement and Innovation Board is very aware of and is making progress with in collaboration with the other political groups. Agreeing what this will mean in practice and then enacting this across the political groups (and

the practice of officer peers) is important to prioritise. Every time the LGA invests in developing one of its peers, it both directly helps improve the quality of peer challenge provided, but also indirectly helps improve the system of assurance in each of the councils peers come from. A multiplier effect, as peers take this learning with them. Making these changes, and the difference they create, clearly externally visible, will then be important.

During the CPC, the peer team encouraged the LGA to develop its relationship with OFLOG '*...in a way which leads to earlier support, challenge and sharing of best practice*'. The team heard how the LGA has continued to seek opportunities for greater collaboration with OFLOG. There is a commitment to further clarify the role of OFLOG as part of the next stage of the Improvement and Assurance Framework. Since the original CPC, the need to further develop this relationship has only increased, adding to the ongoing efforts with further political input may be a further option here.

Horizon Scanning and International Learning

This theme covers the following recommendations from the original CPC report:

- **Develop more horizon scanning positions on behalf of the sector, building on the work started and the methods used more recently (e.g. Culture Commission).**
- **Review how the LGA can better use the analysis from international networks to support its work on behalf of local government. This will help ensure that the learning from these networks is utilised to most effect across the LGA's work.**

The LGA spoke with over 250 leaders and chief executives to inform the 2023 LGA conference document, 'Make it Local', which focused on the public's future priorities for the next general election and a narrative about resetting the relationship between local and central government. Building on this, members have asked officers to develop a White Paper for local government, to influence the delivery programme of any new/returning government.

The White Paper will be a major piece of work for the organisation in the autumn. An extensive consultation programme is being considered with the sector, national politicians, key partners and stakeholders. This is an important document and a significant opportunity for the sector, a major piece of longer term, horizon scanning work which is very much welcomed by the peer team. In developing this as a credible proposition from the sector to a new or returning Government, the LGA may be required to include within this paper some challenging messages back to the sector, around what is expected of it – alongside what is required of Central Government, to arrive at a new central/local relationship which works better overall for local communities.

While this White Paper is being developed, it is important both for the organisation, and the sector that the LGA is able to articulate what the current priorities are more clearly, following the recent changes in political leadership. In the context of a changing and dynamic environment around the sector nationally, developing a set of shorter term priorities to carry the LGA through this intervening period is a useful step to consider. Given the extensive work done for the 'Make it Local' campaign and the ongoing day-to-day relationships the LGA has with authorities across the sector, the LGA is in a good position to develop these quickly, in a way which is likely to align to the longer term ambitions later. Developing cross-party consensus in this environment is more challenging and so having more time together as the collective member and officer leadership of the LGA, building on the first 'away-day' of this nature which took place in the week of the progress review, will help.

The LGA updated the team on some steps that have been taken to enhance lobbying and advocacy work through its international networks. The LGA Brussels Office refreshed its offer for providing international comparisons to enhance lobbying positions and provide comparative work in policy areas including asylum systems, homelessness, civility in public life and place branding.

There remains more the LGA could do to benefit from its international networks and investment.

Building the LGA's involvement in international networks more closely into the

functioning of the LGA, might involve (for example) including the LGA's lead on the UK delegation to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, on the LGA Executive Advisory Board. There is also the opportunity to give profile to the UK's level of compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, to hold an ongoing mirror up to the nature of central/local relations in the UK and how this compares to other nations, particularly – but not limited to – when making the case for a new central/local relationship as part of the Local Government White Paper. There are also opportunities to revisit how the Sustainable Development Goals are implemented in England and the essential role that Local Government plays in this, building on the work done by other nations and opening up discussions with the Foreign Office in doing this.

Member Development

This theme covers the following recommendation from the original CPC report:

- **Refresh the member development and induction offer for members involved with the LGA boards and ensure suitable formal and informal feedback loops are in place across the activity of the boards. Ensure all members feel fully supported to perform their specific roles. This also includes ensuring members involved in lobbying meetings being supported to consistently convey focussed points in a succinct and disciplined way.**

Since the CPC, the LGA has put in place an enhanced member induction programme. This includes support for all members on LGA boards (including the LGA chair, vice and deputy chairs, board chairs and members). 120 members attended the LGA's induction day in September. The LGA has also begun to run enhanced training for member peers, which will continue to develop and is referenced elsewhere in this note. A sample of members from across the LGA policy boards spoke to the team very positively about the level of support and briefings they receive.

The new induction support was seen positively and the LGA are encouraged to build further on this, including nuancing the induction session approach to reflect different levels of experience of members with LGA boards and creating more space on the

induction day for smaller group based work (e.g. for members of specific boards).

The opportunity of bringing boards together to jointly look at issues, when this cuts across the remit of individual boards, could bring benefits to looking at this more collectively, whilst also reducing the need for officers to brief more than one committee on a similar issue. Some examples were also shared of when the activity of the LGA policy boards could be tailored to reflect the activity of other similar membership organisations, working with the efforts of others. For example, working with bodies such as the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners who recently looked at combatting drugs partnerships, which are based on strategies that are developed by Public Health. This is an example where, routinely mapping out the different stakeholders around the issues being considered by the LGA boards, can help refine the approach taken by the policy boards, increasing the prospects of a positive impact.

Additional support and training has been provided for those who act as spokespeople for the LGA, as well as a new process for commissioning briefings and further support for ministerial meetings. Policy colleagues have been supported to ensure briefing notes for lobbying meetings are consistently concise, with briefing meetings to underline key points. The team heard about the positive impact all of this was having, with anecdotal feedback from Government departments about the difference this was making passed to the LGA.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

Senior political and managerial leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

The LGA is well placed to access additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and the peer team are happy to continue supporting the LGA in any way it would find useful, on its own continuous improvement journey.