


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Follow-Up

West Lindsey District Council

Friday 25 February 2022

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

West Lindsey District Council (WLDC) received a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in January 2020. The purpose of the CPC follow-up with WLDC senior members and officers on Friday 25 February 2022 was to help the council take stock of progress made against the recommendations identified in the peer team's January 2020 report. This report summarises the peer team's key observations and suggestions from this follow-up work including background reading. Overall key messages and observations from this follow-up are:

The council has made significant progress against the recommendations in the peer team's January 2020 report. This is no mean feat given that the council has been responding to the various impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout this time.

The peer team particularly noted:

- members' and officers' enthusiasm, commitment and skills to deliver the best services to the district's residents, businesses and other customers
- that members and officers have used their strategic skills and knowledge to progress, and plan the refresh of, their corporate plan. WLDC clearly knows what it wants to achieve and what it needs to do to achieve those aims
- more consolidated internal thinking of council specific concepts and programmes, eg around the Together 24 (T24) programme and Levelling Up
- WLDC's own self-awareness, openness, honesty and ideas as to what it could do better on its continuous improvement journey and why, both through and outside of this CPC process. This report builds as much on the council's own suggestions of how to improve as well as the peer team's recommendations.

2. Summary of the peer challenge approach

2.1. The follow-up review approach

Peer challenges and their follow-ups are focused on improvement and tailored to meet individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and

proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material they read.

To ensure the peer team were familiar with the council, its context, plans for the future and the progress it has made, this work comprised the peer team:

- reading three key background papers provided by WLDC and undertaking additional research
- gathering information and views from 18 senior council members and officers via three main remote discussions, and two additional meetings with individual members on 25 February 2022.

This report provides a brief summary of what the council has done to address each recommendation and the peer team's collated, triangulated findings from this follow-up work. The peer team has provided this feedback as fellow local government members and officers as supportive, constructive critical friends, not as assessors, consultants nor inspectors.

Some notable council actions address more than one recommendation. For brevity, this report aims to mention such actions once, or cross reference them, rather than repeat them against each relevant recommendation.

2.2. The peer team

Peer challenges and their follow-ups are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. Peers from WLDC's January 2020 CPC peer team took part in this follow-up with LGA officers:

- Malcolm Johnston, Chief Executive, Rother District Council
- Cllr Stephen Parker, Hampshire County Council
- Caroline Ryba, Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer, Cambridge City Council
- Vickie Lee, Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development, Wychavon District Council and Malvern Hills District Council
- Penelope Galvin, Programme Adviser - Land Release Fund, One Public Estate Team
- Vicki Goddard, CPC Follow Up Manager, LGA
- Daniella Howell, Programme Support Officer, LGA.

2.3. Scope and focus

The peer team considered all 10 recommendations from its January 2020 report:

- 1. Implement the new structure** – this should be completed as soon as possible and include the senior management structure as well as the structure of council departments including the resolution of temporary arrangements. As far as possible this new structure should seek to ensure the right number of employees with the right skills and experience are in place in substantive posts in order to provide clarity and a firmer footing to enable delivery of the council's priorities.
- 2. Reduce the Customer First Programme to its core and 'rebrand' it** – its objectives are sound but the vision is currently too big and undeliverable, with some confusion about its overall purpose or vision. It has had its successes, eg in service redesign, so has potential for more. Engage your staff, who want to serve customers to full effect, to consider what customers really need and therefore what you need to do to meet those needs. Develop a new programme that offers a clean break from the current one.
- 3. Use the 'purposeful pause' regarding commercialisation and financial planning to understand and identify where future income and savings should come from** – there is understandable uncertainty about local government funding, Brexit and economic conditions generally but use your financial strength, commercial success, momentum and strategic economic thinking to shape your next steps. Much of your potential could be lost if you do not make the most of this pause.
- 4. Clarify what 'social regeneration' means to the council, what it will deliver and how to resource it** – the peer team heard about this new concept throughout its visit as a possible development or even replacement as a new approach to growth. There were however different interpretations within WLDC of what it could mean. The council therefore needs to clarify and agree exactly what it is and is not. This clarity will enable WLDC to decide if social regeneration should be part of its longer-term plans. If so, the council can then confirm its purpose, and plan the required activities and resources.
- 5. Improve communications with all stakeholders** - to keep staff and councillors abreast of developments and decisions so they are clear about what they need to

do. To improve relationships and trust, inform all district stakeholders regularly about what the council is doing, why and explain how they can be kept updated and get involved.

6. **Use the Local Plan Review process to ensure the viability and deliverability of allocated housing sites across the District** – the current Local Plan sets challenging housing targets, a review of the objectively assessed housing need, alongside the proposed allocations required to ensure targets remain deliverable. It will be essential to use your political leadership to inform and influence the next Local Plan.
7. **Review the overview and scrutiny function** – there are mixed views and questions about the function generally, including its effectiveness and purpose. This was reviewed about 18 months ago but there are already differing opinions about the value it adds. A further review is therefore needed to identify the function's value and how it can be most effective, in particular how it can engage all members constructively.
8. **Ensure a structured approach to workforce and succession planning** – WLDC has an ageing workforce, there are pressures on staffing capacity and potential 'single points of failure' – where there will be no or insufficient cover if certain staff are absent or if/when they leave the council. You also have a large number of staff on secondment and acting up, and this has added to an air of uncertainty for your teams which has also informed Recommendation 1. All of this needs addressing before these issues reach crisis point.
9. **Ensure performance management processes are consistent at service level** – you have a corporate performance management team that want to support team managers to improve performance rather than report it. Further engage with team managers as necessary to enable this.
10. **Consider a cultural strategy** - there is potential to align and increase the use of, and maximise income from, your portfolio of existing and planned cultural assets.

3. More Detailed Feedback

3.1. Implement the new structure

The council completed its senior management structure in 2020, comprising the Chief Executive, Director of Corporate Services and five Assistant Directors. The structure has been, and continues to be revised in light of departures since. These revisions include a new Director of Corporate Services role that will incorporate the Section 151 function, and the elevation of three Assistant Director roles to director level to strengthen flexible resilience and succession planning, and address WLDC's extended, strategic post-pandemic district wide programme. Such revisions aim to ensure all council services are represented within the senior structure.

The addition of the Assistant Director, Homes and Communities role is particularly notable, as it identified the council's role in supporting its communities' health and wellbeing, and helping more vulnerable people into homes and enforce decent housing standards across the district.

Senior structure changes since January 2020 have been well communicated to, and received by staff. The latter is evidenced by high member and staff satisfaction with senior management, with references to senior management's supportive, cohesive and constructive culture, and their additional capacity to progress strategy, culture, flooding and other work. **WLDC should continue communicating such structure changes to staff to ensure they continue to understand reporting lines, who oversees what services, and that there is senior stability and capacity to deliver WLDC's work in these uncertain times for all councils. As part of this work, the council should continue to gauge and respond to staff feedback.**

There had been notable interim and other temporary appointments throughout the council in January 2020, creating pressure on services and uncertainty for staff. These appointments needed resolving to improve overall organisational capacity, staff wellbeing and clarity of direction. WLDC has made such changes since, particularly within the finance, planning and land charges teams. It is also seeking to resolve food enforcement hygiene and planning staff vacancies. Other temporary arrangements still remain however, eg within the development management and growth teams, which are expected to be resolved shortly. **The council needs to resolve all these temporary arrangements throughout the council to fully**

overcome these issues. This will ensure the right number of skilled and experienced employees are in substantive posts to enable sound delivery of the council's priorities, and reassure staff of the structure.

Whole council elections in May 2023 will enable WLDC to plan longer term, and there is real determination at WLDC to do things ever better, based on its learning throughout the pandemic and the council's more strategic and cohesive footing since returning to the Chief Executive model in 2020.

3.2. Reduce the Customer First Programme to its core and 'rebrand' it

This programme had its successes but was too big and undeliverable, with confusion about its overall purpose or vision. WLDC also recognised that services needed supporting to best serve customers. The council therefore launched its T24 programme in August 2020 to review all council services by December 2024 and ensure they are fit for purpose and sustainable in terms of their work, finances and staffing. Qualified Change Management Practitioners work closely with each service team before and throughout their review to fully engage all staff to make maximum improvements.

T24 has been led from the outset by the Assistant Director, Operational and Commercial, to ensure reviews are led by, rather than 'done to', services. A T24 intranet page provides information and updates about the programme. Popular one to one sessions enable staff to share their personal views, which are fed back anonymously to managers. Staff are widely involved in service reviews generally as they can see how their views make a positive difference.

One of five completed reviews was with the land charges team, whose services were particularly affected by the first national lockdown in response to the pandemic from March 2020. Many people could not move house or faced significant delays in doing so because they could not acquire the necessary search information. This service review assisted these and other issues, most notably bringing response times to land charges requests down from typically 30 to five days. WLDC's response to fly-tipping has also significantly improved through this review process. Photos of fly-tips can be submitted and immediately addressed via the council's customer relationship management system.

These reviews have also delivered approximately £50,000 of savings to date, helping WLDC to meet its savings target of £300,000 by 2024. **The T24 (governance) Board will need to monitor, maintain and possibly accelerate the momentum of these reviews and address issues to keep this and other financial targets, budgets and the T24 programme on track.** This is particularly because costs of forthcoming senior structure changes could negatively impact these savings. **The T24 Board should also consider the potential benefits of training/recruiting further Change Management Practitioners to undertake reviews more quickly than currently scheduled.** This is further to the popularity of these reviews and consequent requests to bring scheduled reviews forward.

The peer team heard that residents do not necessarily know about T24, do not always get responses to their requests generally, and therefore approach members to resolve their issues. **WLDC should therefore consider how to involve members, residents and other customers in and after T24 service reviews to ensure their needs are understood and responded to as effectively as possible. This includes looking to agree with them and officers a standard response time to requests and publicise it,** so that these expectations are clear to all.

The peer team also heard that local partners do not always respond straight away to requests either but the council is working with them to improve this. Such approaches with government departments, the NHS, the Royal Airforce, the voluntary and community sector, and others have developed trusted local partnerships, which have particularly excelled through the pandemic to address local issues.

The council also learns from complaints and other experiences to improve services and processes, eg fly-tipping and waste collection. **T24 reviews should also align with WLDC's customer satisfaction corporate health indicators to improve related performance as much as possible.**

3.3. Use the 'purposeful pause' regarding commercialisation and financial planning to understand and identify where future income and savings should come from

WLDC has completed its Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2021-2026, with additional commercial opportunities, potential efficiencies and savings under consideration through its annual and developing business planning/framework. The

council also appointed a Commercial Development Manager in July 2020 to provide additional capacity and capability, and WLDC's Commercial Board considers monthly updates and monitoring of council commercial activities, and new ideas.

Whilst the council has a current savings target of £300,000 by 2024, the target was originally £900,000, the latter based on a worst case scenario in case required. Detailed reviews of every service's budget and the council's investment programme have looked at savings opportunities. WLDC's general reserve is approximately £1 million above its set minimum.

The MTFP 2022-27 identifies a funding gap of £1.6 million for 2023/24, rising to £2 million for 2026/27. WLDC appears to be planning for these gaps but, like any other council, is operating in a volatile environment. Covid-19 has not impacted hugely on commercial income but has halted other progress, eg where people have not been able to use council services due to imposed restrictions. WLDC has however used the 'purposeful pause' and time that could not be spent delivering face to face services to review its commercial approach and activities. **WLDC needs to continue this commercial momentum to ensure it progresses and is not wasted.**

3.4. Clarify what 'social regeneration' means to the council, what it will deliver and how to resource it

Since the peer team's January 2020 report, the council has been drafting a health and wellbeing strategy with its districts, as well as internally. The internal strategy will ensure that WLDC's services address inequalities and tackle issues that lead to deprivation, overseen by the Assistant Director, Homes and Communities.

The council has also been awarded over £10m in Levelling Up Funding for its 'Thriving Gainsborough 2024' bid. 'Levelling Up' has therefore begun to replace the language of social regeneration within the council's plans to improve health and wellbeing and regenerate the district.

The peer team spoke to members who have firm ideas of what 'levelling up' means within the district, ie increasing access to services, facilities and life opportunities, especially for those who cannot access transport, or afford, to make the most of them. The council also recognises that 'levelling up' means different things to different people and how WLDC can help them, eg if people want to go to university,

get a job or are leaving the care system. Social regeneration was previously used cautiously at community level, as it could suggest that some areas were ‘that bad’ as to require such intervention. Yet whilst ‘levelling up’ is a more accessible term, its meaning remains unclear nationally and locally. WLDC recognises this through its recently adopted Economic Recovery Plan, and that the council needs to understand and address the needs of all its local communities, eg from the young and old to the most deprived. **To do this, WLDC needs to work with its members, staff, communities and partners from the outset to agree and clarify what ‘levelling up’ means for the district, especially its rural areas.** This will then be reflected in and delivered through WLDC’s next corporate plan, which is due for review in 2023. **WLDC should also feedback its own definition of ‘levelling up’ to civil servants to help inform central government’s Levelling Up approach.**

The council will also need to regularly engage and communicate with its communities, other external stakeholders and partners, members and officers on its health and wellbeing strategy, ‘levelling up’ and other related programmes, including local integrated care systems, and other operational and strategic plans. This will ensure they all continually contribute to the aims and delivery of these programmes to make a positive, practical difference to local people’s health and wellbeing.

3.5. Improve communications with all stakeholders

Communications with members and staff have increased significantly in various ways since January 2020, not least because of the pandemic. This includes more regular emails, staff surveys (with high response and approval rates), bulletins, activities, online and face to face fora, more access to the Chief Executive and his ward ‘walk arounds’ with each ward member to understand local issues, challenges and perspectives. Members are also more involved in the council’s work. Such communications have provided sources of support throughout the pandemic as well as work updates, often presented in a more informal, supportive and personal style by senior managers. The peer team did not hear so much about feedback from and impacts of these increased communications, so would advise WLDC to **review how the council monitors and addresses issues,** so communications best motivate and engage with members and officers, and enhance relationships and trust.

In its January 2020 report and during its February 2022 follow-up work, the peer team noted the perception that WLDC was and remains 'Gainsborough centric'. Much of WLDC's work was and still is understandably taking place in Gainsborough but much is also happening throughout the district, which is not as effectively communicated, hence this perception. The council sends information about its work to parishes via local publications, and is progressing its work to support markets and use the Gainsborough Trinity Arts centre hub facilities across the whole district. The council recognises this perception however and has its own suggestions to address this through its communications, eg referring to its wider plans for the district including its local lottery and community grants work, listing other places before Gainsborough, and naming members' wards as well as their names to promote their work throughout the district. **The council should action these and other ideas through its external communications strategy to address this Gainsborough centric perception.**

3.6. Use the Local Plan Review process to ensure the viability and deliverability of allocated housing sites across the District

A key part of this original recommendation was to ensure the council uses its political leadership as a credible partner to best inform and influence the next Local Plan. As part of this, WLDC has brought together its corporate plan, Local Plan and Climate Change and Environment Strategy under its central policy and strategy team. This has strengthened the corporate, strategic and political position of this work. The policy and strategy team is also enhancing data and information collation to best understand the district for the next corporate and Local Plan including to support the viability of the district and ultimately ensure deliverability of key sites. This has helped strategic and financial joint working with partners, council members and officers to recognise WLDC's contribution. Through enhanced partnership with the Central Lincolnshire Authorities, the council's senior management has also delivered key outcomes across West Lindsey in terms of the Local Plan review, including a specific policy for RAF Scampton and an improved policy context for the market towns of Caistor and Market Rasen. Council members also feel more involved.

The Central Lincolnshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee, which the Leader of the Council currently chairs, will consider the updated draft Local Plan at its meeting in

February 2022 with a view to proceeding with the final Regulation 19 consultation in spring 2022 before submitting the final plan to the Planning Inspectorate in the summer. Viability challenges still need resolving but WLDC continues to monitor the five year land supply to ensure delivery and supply keep pace with need and demand. The council also works closely with land owners, developers and registered housing providers to deliver a quality offer across the district.

3.7. Review the overview and scrutiny function

The function and operation of the overview and scrutiny committee is considered as part of WLDC's annual review of its constitution, eg through surveying members, presenting results to the governance and audit committee, and work through democratic services and committees to review overview and scrutiny.

The council also recognises and supports scrutiny as a specific skill and has therefore invested in regular training and support so members can maximise their scrutiny roles to make the most positive difference to WLDC's decision-making. The peer team heard how overview and scrutiny's work, challenge and feedback with senior officers has been more useful as a result. There is more preparation with members in advance of committee meetings, overview and scrutiny members take more ownership of their work, reports are better informed, working parties are more effective, as is enhanced questioning and feedback on flooding, drainage, leisure and other issues.

The focus for overview and scrutiny during 2021/22 has been a return to pre-pandemic business as usual, with a full work-plan inviting external partners, eg the police, NHS, leisure providers and the Environment Agency to discuss their work on a regular basis, scrutinising performance management reviews referred from the council's two policy committees, and greater use of informal workshops, and task and finish groups. Key improvements as a result of this enhanced approach includes those on local land charges and fly-tipping as mentioned earlier in this report.

3.8. Ensure a structured approach to workforce and succession planning

Succession planning has already been referred to in section 3.1 with regards to senior management. It also forms part of T24 service reviews to address resilience, risk, capacity, training and development throughout the council.

The T24 Board ensures linkages are made between business planning and service reviews, and that workforce planning is considered throughout the council's strategic planning processes. Business and strategic planning support progresses staff development across the council generally, through a clear framework of appraisals, one to one meetings etc. This strengthens the 'golden thread' from the council's strategic objectives to each member of staff's contribution to those through their service teams.

Reviewing services individually through T24 however runs the risk of strengthening silo working and impact council-wide workforce and succession planning. **The council should therefore enable services to work better together to make the most of staff's skills and experience and to avoid silo-working.**

Whilst services await their T24 reviews, they can implement their own talent development/future leaders programmes, which can lead to Masters in Business Administration qualifications. Frontline staff schemes, although limited, have also been implemented, eg retraining staff through the pandemic to deliver waste collection services, and creating crematorium trainee posts. Such schemes are helping to improve resilience and succession planning in frontline services.

WLDC recognises that it needs to further progress its workforce strategy across the whole council, especially at frontline level, although this has been complicated and exacerbated by the pandemic. Flexible/agile working for example requires more technology than before, and additional support is required to assist mental health and wellbeing. WLDC is also thinking ahead, eg to encourage staff to stay at the council by supporting their further development 'to be the best version of themselves'.

WLDC has appointed three Change Support Officers who provide additional capacity and support to teams in the event of long-term absence or vacancy filling. Additional resources can be called upon in times of need, eg external suppliers for technical or specialist expertise. It is not possible to call upon such resources across the whole council but WLDC considers them wherever possible.

The peer team heard that there is a council objective for more members to undertake training but did not hear much more on this subject. **WLDC should therefore progress member training and development**, to enhance their roles and impact.

3.9. Ensure performance management processes are consistent at service level

Since January 2020, the council has made good progress generally to develop and support consistent performance management across services. This includes for example Assistant Directors and service managers taking more ownership and regularly discussing their portfolio's performance, including their contribution to the corporate plan and forward planning, with the corporate performance team. The Management Team and Policy Committee then considers these updates. All such work appears to be improving performance where issues arise. The overview and scrutiny committee's work is also contributing as outlined in section 3.7.

Performance management is also a key element of T24, so that potential service improvements can be assessed and made.

WLDC recognises there is more to be done and wants performance management to be a constantly, consistently used improvement tool as a culturally wide principle. The roll-out and embedding of the council's new corporate performance management system from April 2022 will be key to this, enabling decision makers to access combined financial and performance data, to enhance decision making, service planning and management, continuous learning and improvement in real time.

3.10. Consider a cultural strategy

In June 2021, the council identified existing district wide cultural activity and suggested five relevant work streams. In September 2021, members approved those work streams, a cultural action plan to support them, fixed-term officer capacity and other related activity. Regular sessions with members and officers are progressing this work. The action plan will be monitored and measured through the council's Commercial Board, reported back to WLDC's two policy committees, and the Governance and Audit Committee will continue to monitor this recommendation.

The council should make full use of the cultural action plan, eg to avoid cultural events taking place on the same day or being duplicated/repeated unnecessarily, and to ensure all the plan's activities are delivered to their full potential. As part of this, WLDC is considering opportunities to align cinema screenings and other cultural programmes between venues, including mobile ones, across the district, so that all cultural opportunities are best used across the district. The council is also working

with its local university, considering opportunities in Market Rasen, developing the Trinity Arts Centre has a cultural hub for the whole district, and developing links with the Lincolnshire Showground.

WLDC is horizon scanning for external funding to support related activities. If it is not already doing so, **the council should apply for such funding strategically and selectively**. This will ensure staff capacity focuses on drafting the strongest bids relating to key, identified activities, which are more likely to be successful. This will avoid drafting multiple, potentially weaker bids that may negatively influence funders' future decisions.

Some cultural opportunities can exclude proportions of communities. This can be for example by tickets being too expensive, only available online, venues and tickets offices not being easily accessible by public transport, or by events not appealing or not being promoted equally to everyone. **The council needs to consider such issues, especially as part of its levelling up agenda, so opportunities are accessible, affordable and appealing to as many people as possible.**

WLDC is also carefully considering the balance and alignment between its cultural action plan and that for its visitor economy. This includes developing and finalising both plans with support from the LGA as part of the council's commercial agenda to ensure they are affordable and self-supporting.

4. Next steps

The LGA would like to thank WLDC for undertaking this follow-up. The peer team appreciate that senior officers and political leaders will want to reflect on the findings within this report to determine how the council 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 for development and improvement.

Mark Edgell (Principal Adviser) is a main point of contact between the council and the LGA at mark.edgell@local.gov.uk. The four political group offices of the LGA also provide continued support of councillors using accredited peers. These political group offices can be accessed through the LGA's website at www.local.gov.uk.