


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Cheshire West and Chester Council

22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023

Feedback





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# 1. Introduction

The six month progress review is an integral part of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) process and takes place approximately six months from publication of the CPC action plan. The purpose of a progress review is to support councils in implementing their action plan, with an opportunity for:

- Feedback from the peer team on the early progress made by the Council against the CPC recommendations and action plan.
- A sounding board – around the alignment of actions in the action plan to the recommendations and any early impact or learning from the progress made against this action plan.
- Space to discuss or design ways of capitalising / navigating significant changes in the local operating environment, since the team were ‘on-site’.

A copy of the Council’s CPC report can be found in the link below and should be read in conjunction with this note:

[https://cmttpublic.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/documents/s78870/Appendix-A-LGA-Corporate-Peer-Challenge-Feedback-Report-Cheshire-West-and-Chester\\_Final.pdf](https://cmttpublic.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/documents/s78870/Appendix-A-LGA-Corporate-Peer-Challenge-Feedback-Report-Cheshire-West-and-Chester_Final.pdf)

Alongside this report, the Council published an action plan in response to the recommendations which can also be found on the Council’s website:

<https://cmttpublic.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/documents/s78871/Appendix%20B%20-%20Peer%20Review%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

## 2. Summary of the approach

This progress review took place remotely on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023. The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the CPC, whilst providing some additional focus to two specific themes from the original peer challenge:

- Community engagement and co-design
- Health and social care Integration

For this six-month progress review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Cllr Shaun Davies (Leader – Telford and Wrekin Council)
- Angie Ridgwell (Chief Executive – Lancashire County Council)
- Peer Challenge Manager - Dan Archer (Senior Regional Adviser – LGA)

The peer team met virtually via MS Teams over the course of an afternoon with the following representatives:

- Cllr Louise Gittins (Leader)
- Andrew Lewis (Chief Executive)
- Laurence Ainsworth (Director of Public Services Reform)
- Bev Wilson (Head of Insight and Intelligence)
- Rachel Foster (Heads of Libraries, Culture and Communities)
- Emma Cleminson (Transformation Team Portfolio Manager - Adult Social Care)
- Morgan Jones (Strategy and Innovation Manager)
- Del Curtis (Deputy Chief Executive (Health & Wellbeing) and Cheshire & Merseyside NHS Director (Cheshire West))
- Charlotte Walton (Director of Adult Social Care and Health)
- Laura Marsh (Associate Director, Transformation & Partnerships, Cheshire West)
- Alex Mitchell (Associate Director, Finance, Cheshire West)

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

The Council's July 2022 CPC recognised Cheshire West and Chester as “*an impressive and ambitious Council with an established track record of providing high quality services, strong financial management and robust governance*”. As with all CPCs, the report also gave a set of recommendations that can help the Council to continue to build on this, in support of its ambitions.

The sections that follow highlight the steps the Council have taken against the recommendations made in July 2022 and identify some points the Council may wish to consider in continuing to take the recommendations forward.

What is clear, is that the Council have taken a thoughtful and mature response to the CPC recommendations.

The Council is now entering into a new period of change, with the process to recruit a new Chief Executive beginning shortly. To support the organisation to continue moving forward both during and following this period of change, it is important that clear, consistent messages around practical corporate requirements are kept, shared and monitored. The Leader and CEX are clearly focused on ensuring a smooth and effective transition. The reflections in this note may therefore be of assistance both in supporting the organisation through this short term period of change and informing the Council's recruitment plans for the longer term. In particular, there remains a strong desire from members to move towards a more advanced approach to co-design and community engagement, which is a significant, ongoing corporate change programme.

The forthcoming ‘all-out’ local elections are an important point to reflect on the below recommendations again and identify the type of support new members from May will require, to help them in their roles. Following the local elections, the Council are planning to write a new Corporate Plan. Using this to send out a clear message about the type of organisation the Council wishes to move towards is a great opportunity to capitalise on.

## Financial Planning

Both the 2022 and 2017 CPCs at Cheshire West and Chester highlighted the strength of financial management at the Council. At the time of the 2022 CPC, the Council - like all councils nationally - were in the midst of an emerging 'perfect storm' of rapidly growing demand for services, an increasing complexity in the demand for services, a sharply rising level of inflation, a developing cost-of-living crisis and the likelihood of an increased pay award nationally. With this in mind, the CPC made the following recommendations:

- **Further develop the type of live, dynamic modelling which will help the Council to understand and keep abreast of the changing financial pressures currently being faced, linked to rising inflation, cost of living and increasing demand.** Use this to inform timely decision making and enable ongoing responses that address the financial pressures this is creating in sustainable ways.
- **Revisit the revenue and capital budget plans in light of these new financial pressures over the immediate and medium term, making change as necessary, based on the priorities for the borough.**

The Council has now set a balanced budget for the next two years (23/24 and 24/25) which includes a requirement to deliver on £49.3m of savings over this period - £25.4m of which is in 23-24. The Council has also developed a four year capital programme and is beginning work on a ten year Capital Programme. Invest-to-save schemes have been developed as part of the revenue budget, supported by the use of one-off reserves which are significant in 23/24 at around £14.5m. The Council has a current assumption of a further funding gap of £29.1m between 2025 – 2027. Like all councils, the longer term financial certainty that a multi-year settlement would help to provide would be very much welcomed. In the absence of this however, like all councils, work to develop and refine working assumptions to inform longer term planning is required. Given the macro-level uncertainties around future funding across the sector, in the period from 2025/26 onwards, the Council may wish to explore the underpinning assumptions with members and the different scenarios they present, in order to develop a set of options with a clear understanding of the shared risks, that can be used, or not, as this picture develops further. Further empowering members in the

financial planning process and helping to co-design plans as appropriate, from an earlier stage.

In order to develop the budget options for 23/24 and 24/25, the team heard how the Council has advanced its approach to data modelling and forecasting. Examples of which include the development of a demand and cost forecast models based on older people's service demand data, modelling future demand for externally commissioned mental health services as well as modelling for SEND services and Learning Disabilities. The Council is also progressing work to develop a more sophisticated model for forecasting the number of Children in Care, which can be used to inform placement sufficiency planning. To enable this work, the Council is continuing to develop its 'Data Hive' approach, which is positioned to share and develop data skills and literacy across the Council. This approach utilises MSc data science student placements, a growing network of around 100 officers who are trained in Power BI across the Council and the use of data apprenticeships at different levels across the Council.

As this work continues to develop, the skills and networks it creates can potentially benefit the Council for many years to come – supporting more informed and highly locally informed decision making. Effective forecasting is difficult. It is subject to volatility in a whole host of global, national and local factors, whilst also being inherently reliant on the quality of the base, operational data input. On this latter point, the Council has recently identified examples where the quality of operational data needs to be further strengthened and will be taking steps in this regard. Ensuring the different parties who hold responsibility for data quality at this entry level know the types of strategic financial decisions this information is increasingly being used to inform, may also help in supporting this as a collective endeavour.

## **Community Engagement and Co-Design**

This is a theme that the Council asked the peer team to give a specific focus on as part of the July 2022 CPC, building on the clear message from the political leadership to see the Council work more closely with the community and community groups. The peer challenge saw great examples of projects that engaged the community and community groups and encouraged the Council to develop wider cross-cutting steps,

to help the Council to move towards this being a mainstreamed part of the corporate mindset:

- **In line with the recommendation from the Future of Adult Social Care Commission, develop and agree a definition of co-design and a strategic approach to co-production with the key local stakeholders.** This is a recommendation which should be applied to the Council's wider activities and helps shape how the Council as a corporate body works with others in future as picked up in the below recommendation. Use this time to have honest conversations about opportunities and obstacles to working in this way using potential scenarios.
- **With this definition, develop a multi-faceted approach to making engagement, co-design and co-production a collectively owned part of the cultural mindset of the Council.**
- **Look for further opportunities to utilise the partnerships that exist locally to make progress against the wider priorities for the borough.** Looking at the next set of challenges creatively as 'How could this be delivered?' rather than 'How can we deliver?'.
- **Refresh the approach to member case management and reporting of service issues which may involve putting in place new case management and reporting systems underpinned by new processes which support timely updates on queries.**

Focusing firstly on a residents experience of contacting the Council, the Council have recently undertaken a soft launch of a new digital customer portal, which will go fully live by June 2023. This digital portal is there to support the Council's existing mobile app, which is reportedly well used. The portal will help to identify where a person is located and provide feedback directly on similar issues reported locally recently as well as the expected resolution timescales. At mid-year, the Council put in place an action plan to speed up the timescales for responding to complaints, which had dropped to 57% at stage 1 and 35% at stage 2, both against targets of 98%. Performance has started to improve two months later, albeit with more work to do, with performance reported to the peer team at 74% and 67% respectively against those measures.



In terms of face-to-face customer contact, a 'no wrong door' project has been completed. Whilst recognising that 'no wrong door' is something that requires ongoing attention as service requirements, experience and expectations change over time. This project has included increasing the capacity to support a better face-to-face experience and has been supported by 'Resident Assistance Points' (technology to enable customers to access Council services) across the borough, as well as the use of key libraries for further face-to-face support. New resource materials and training have been provided to officers across the Council to further support effective signposting and the customer experience.

A Member ICT Working Group has also explored the different options for a new case management system for Elected Members and have opted for a solution which is based on the use of Microsoft Teams and SharePoint. This is due to launch by June also and is supported by dedicated resource.

All of the above are naturally key to providing a quality, modern and efficient service to local residents, but sends a message in demonstrating that the Council lives what it says, in wanting a closer working relationship with local communities.

The Council has continued to implement and expand projects and programmes that involve the Council working more closely with communities and community groups. An example of this is 'Let's Talk' – a community led support initiative which had been piloted in Ellesmere Port and then followed by new sites in Blacon and Lache in December 2022, with further plans in place to expand this to sites in Northwich and Winsford in April 2023. The Council has also recruited a new cohort of 'Community Inspirer' volunteers – building on the impressive work of the Community Inspirers that the peer team met in July 2022. The Council has also hosted a large scale public engagement event in regards to a proposed Hydrogen Village in Whitby in Ellesmere Port to discuss public concerns, which will be followed by a poll of those households effected.

To enable a 'multi-faceted' approach to making engagement, co-design and co-production a more collectively owned mindset across the Council, a corporate working group has been established which reports into the Stronger Communities Board. The group is undertaking a desktop review of co-production approaches and mapping practice within the Council. The Council is also discussing with partners and residents the development of a participation spectrum, which includes the varying ways in which

the Council can consult, engage, co-design, co-create and so-forth, as is appropriate for different scenarios. The Council is keen to ensure health and community buy-in to this work. A community asset framework and transfer guidance is now also in place, following the peer challenge. This includes three pilot projects and an online platform to collate information, advice and guidance. This has not yet been formally launched, with a decision on this to be made, following the local elections in May. The Council is still very much in the early stages of moving from its successes in developing projects that feature strong co-design elements, to an approach that makes this the initial way in which the organisation thinks and approaches things corporately. The Council are encouraged to gather further learning from others who managed to shift from a project to a place based approach. It is important in making this shift that the Council is able to thoroughly engage members and officers across the Council in the development of the participation spectrum and the framework for co-design and engagement this leads to, so that all clearly understand why this is being prioritised, what it means for them and how they use it.

The commitment to develop a new Corporate Plan following the ‘all-out’ elections in May provides a great opportunity to send a clear message out about the direction the Council is taking as a ‘Community Council’. Officers at the Council are developing ideas for how the process can be changed to enable more engagement and co-design from the earlier stages - *“the approach we take to developing the next Corporate Plan is as important as the document itself”*.

## **Health and Social Care Integration**

The original peer challenge took place the week following the Health and Care Act reforms coming into effect. This signalled the start of a new chapter in health and care integration, which in Cheshire West and Chester seeks to build upon the strength of partner relations in this field across the borough. The peer team heard about the different challenges the local system would have to overcome in order to make a success of integration and gave the following recommendation which included working through the short and medium term practical challenges, whilst building towards the longer term aims:

- **Further develop the detailed plan for health and social care integration, taking into account the pressures around the system as well as the needs and objectives required in stages across the short, medium and longer term.**

Since July 2022, the Council and partners have taken stock of the Cheshire West Place Plan and the peer team heard at this progress review of the extensive work undertaken to capitalise on and support closer integration. This has included prioritising support for ‘home first’ and hospital discharge, capturing the local patient experience and view as well as building more towards co-production across the local system.

Supporting local hospitals to deal with significant pressures over recent months, which were beyond the usual winter pressures, has also been an important immediate focus. The Council want to see and support longer term, collective winter planning based on a singular funding pot and plan with the different mechanisms as necessary for reporting back. This is an example where leads across the place are seeking pragmatic solutions within the parameters available.

At a borough / place level, making clear the permissions to staff and partners “to get on and do” has been a focus, so as to encourage the conditions for real value added to be created. With this in mind, work is ongoing to further develop partnerships at a local place level. Informal principles around how partnership working can be supported are being co-produced through a ‘Local Voices Framework’, which is being led by the Cheshire West Voluntary Action. This is a continuous piece of work that will evolve based on the lived experience of co-producing over time and links back to the earlier section on community engagement and co-design. The Council are keen to continue to collectively navigate challenges and opportunities from integration both with colleagues and partners at a Cheshire and Merseyside footprint as well as a place and community footprint.

In terms of the capacity available at a local place level, since the peer team were onsite in July 2022, a team of Associate Directors have been recruited to work with and support the Place Lead. Former CCG staff have been moved into place-based roles, although a number of vacancies still remain. Staff are being supported with this change, through what has been recognised by senior leaders as a challenging period of re-alignment. Staff are being supported to work together in a co-located way, recognising the combined value and leadership they bring when working well together.


Co-locating staff in this way has also helped to release savings from the cost of estate to the NHS and provides a line of revenue to the Council. As part of the support for staff, continuing to look into the medium term and developing the skills required of those involved in the health and social care system is another important way of helping staff and partners to feel the value they can bring to place and how they are integral to improving local outcomes.

An integrated transformation steering group has been established, to state and steer the delivery of the integration priorities, ensuring they are easy to recognise and understand. An integrated finance, resource and investment group has also been established to bring together finance colleagues to look at joint recovery plans and to support partners in moving money around the system suitably swiftly, when required. This is an important step given the systemic financial challenges that present across health and social care nationally, as well as at a local place level with further, significant savings and efficiencies a known ongoing requirement across the system. Partners are now working together to look more closely at the overall impact of Council and health spending decisions and the opportunities arising from this. This includes looking to do more around joint brokerage and driving cost avoidance approaches out of the system.

The Council is well positioned to support and influence the system locally in a positive way, to help respond to the priorities for health and social care integration and ultimately the difference this can then bring to local communities. The Leader for example is both the Chair of the Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Care Partnership Board as well as the Cheshire West Health and Wellbeing Board. Whether there are further opportunities to use this credibility and position within the local system to be an influential voice for specific 'asks' of the place is something that should continue to be considered.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

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



In-line with the approach to the CPC report itself and in the spirit of openness and transparency, the Council are asked to publish this note.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

As a high performing Council, the previous CPC report recommended that the Council *“look to step forward and share your corporate learning and experiences with others across the sector”*. Six months on from publication of the CPC action plan there are a number of examples where the Council have been able to do this, privately and publicly. Examples of this have included cost of living, climate change, economic growth, environmental services, adult social care and customer focus. The LGA would like to thank the Council for contributing to sector led improvement in such a way, for the benefit of other councils right across the sector.

Claire Hogan (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the council and the Local Government Association (LGA). Claire’s email address is [claire.hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:claire.hogan@local.gov.uk).