

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Torbay Council

2nd and 3rd April 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in April 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

A Progress Review is an integral part of the corporate peer challenge process and is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's related action plan
- Consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were on-site including any further support needs
- Discuss the early impact and learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank Torbay Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. The Progress Review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Torbay Council took place on 2nd and 3rd April 2025. It focused on the recommendations from the corporate peer challenge as follows:

Recommendation 1

- Adopt a council Business Plan agreed on a cross-party basis that outlines a clear set of strategic political priorities

Recommendation 2

- The very small number of elected members from across the council chamber whose behaviours are impacting so negatively must ask themselves what they want their legacy to be and find ways of working effectively in a context of the minority Administration No Overall Control arrangement

Recommendation 3

- Gear up fully to deliver the proposed Combined County Authority arrangements

Recommendation 4

- Dedicate greater time and space for thinking and collaboration across the organisation to inform strategic direction and focus on outcomes and develop a more distributed model of leadership

Recommendation 5

- Ensure the People Strategy is collectively owned and led from the top

Recommendation 6

- Ensure corporate leadership and ownership of the equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda

Recommendation 7

- Reflect on current approaches around process and system to ensure risk is balanced with outcomes and the necessary assurance is received on what matters most

Recommendation 8

- Deliver a 'reset' of Overview and Scrutiny organisationally and politically

Recommendation 9

- Create the space for cross-party consideration of matters relating to Constitutional and elected member governance

Recommendation 10

- Maintain the focus on the nine areas of significant spend and demand pressure

Recommendation 11

- Consider the approach to the council's buildings and accommodation and take stock of the learning, challenges and opportunities around the 'return to the workplace'

Recommendation 12

- Enhance the corporate approach to transformation

Recommendation 13

- Evolve the role and ways of working of corporate services

Recommendation 14

- Undertake the necessary functional realignments in relation to the Torbay Economic Development Company (known as TDA)


Recommendation 15

- Dedicate the necessary resource to develop the housing strategy and ensure the delivery of it is corporately owned

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The following peers were involved in the Progress Review:

- Rob Walsh, Chief Executive, North East Lincolnshire Council
- Councillor Laura Mayes, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills and Deputy Leader, Wiltshire Council (Conservative)
- Councillor Gareth Roberts, Leader, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (Liberal Democrat) and London Assembly Member
- Kate Martin, Executive Director for City Futures, Sheffield City Council
- Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser, South-West Region, Local Government Association
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association



The council has fully embraced the recommendations from the corporate peer challenge in April 2024 and driven forward change and improvement in a range of areas in response.

Organisational and Place Leadership

The council's Business Plan was adopted by Cabinet in June 2024. This represents a positive and constructive development, in a context of the draft of this 'delivery plan' having been caught up in political tensions at the time of the corporate peer challenge. The adoption of the Business Plan had been seen at the time of our original visit as important in establishing a clear set of manageable priorities to enable real focus for the organisation. A revised Corporate Performance Report has been established, aligned with and underpinning the Business Plan, and a new performance management framework is currently being rolled out for the organisation.

Officers that we spoke to at a range of levels reflected the extent of the pressures that are being faced by the council, which largely mirror the situation nationally for local government. These include adapting to national policy changes, legislative change, increasing regulation in a number of areas and devolution. Such types of pressure aren't going to go away or diminish, leaving an organisation that, as with many councils, recognises it is stretched. This means that effort and focus has to be applied much more widely than just on the Business Plan which, whilst acting as a very useful point of reference for the organisation, is not yet being seen to be a key driver of it. We would encourage the council to use the Business Plan to focus its attention as much as possible.

The corporate peer challenge highlighted the positive organisational culture that exists in the council, centred on teamwork, mutual support and trust between colleagues. It is clear from our discussions during the Progress Review that staff hold the council's managerial leadership in high regard and very much value the 'open door' and supportive culture that continues to be engendered.

More 'distributed leadership' is being seen within the council now, although the increase in the sharing of the leadership responsibilities is recognised as a 'work in

progress'. This development is positive in its' own right for all concerned but it is also helping to mitigate the risk that the corporate peer challenge highlighted around so much being vested in the Chief Executive. Directors are felt by staff to be visible, accessible and communicating well.

The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (CCA) came into being in February 2025 and met for the first time the following month. The council's Leader is its' Chair, whilst the council's Chief Executive fulfils that same position with the CCA. Their holding of these key roles is reflective of the regard that the council is held in regionally and across wider local government. Clearly, with the English Devolution White Paper, there is a changing landscape in respect of Combined Authorities. A key question is how the Devon and Torbay CCA progresses in the coming year and beyond and what is required in the way of a 'route map' to navigate what is complex territory.

The housing agenda, and the challenges and opportunities it represents, was highlighted through the corporate peer challenge as one of the key priority areas for Torbay. Progressing the development of a housing strategy was emphasised as being of critical importance to the successful and inclusive regeneration of Torbay, as was driving further progress in the challenges around homelessness. It is therefore positive that the Housing Delivery Plan for Torbay was adopted in June 2024 and a Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Action Plan is also now set for adoption.

Part of our feedback a year ago was that the 'Torbay Story' enjoys the full support of partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Established regeneration partnerships were demonstrating strong support and continued commitment to the next phase for Torbay and the council's then new regeneration partnership with Willmot Dixon and Milligan showed early positive signs. The council has invested time and effort in these strategic relationships over the last 12 months and they have clearly gone from strength to strength.

The corporate peer challenge also highlighted the scale of regeneration in Torbay as being likely to require, and provide the opportunity to establish, additional partnerships and to necessitate regional funding structural support and national agency bespoke capacity. Again, effort has gone into these spheres and the council

sees its relationships with the likes of Homes England, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Arts Council having been enhanced significantly as a result.

All of these relationships and the £100m plus of investment that has been secured through the likes of 'Levelling Up', 'Town Deal' and 'Future High Streets' look set to start reaping the appropriate reward in the coming year, delivering a positive difference in the Bay. During the Progress Review we saw what had been delivered on The Strand and the improvements to the public realm around the harbour and we heard of the progress being made with the likes of Union Square, Victoria Square, Crossways and the Debenhams site. Partners highlighted the scepticism that still exists in communities following decades of plans and promises around regeneration that hadn't lived up to expectations. However, they are confident that as 'spades start to be seen in the ground' over the coming months and further tangible difference is made, this scepticism will dissipate and confidence amongst all stakeholders will go from strength to strength. The council is now exploring how additional investment partnering can be achieved in order to help realise the ambitions for the Bay.

Elected members and officers at all levels are very mindful of the significance of local government re-organisation in Devon. Staff appreciate the honest communication to them around this agenda from their leadership and see the council as having adopted a positive and mature approach in this very complex landscape. The plea from staff is for the council to 'keep on keeping on' in seeking to shape the future. Their hope is that reorganisation does not become a distraction, although there is widespread recognition that this will be difficult to avoid.

Governance

A 'Group Leaders Agreement' has been adopted in recent weeks. It was formally signed by the three Group Leaders at Full Council and approved by the wider elected membership in this forum. The Agreement clarifies the respective roles and arrangements of the Administration and the Opposition and is a very constructive and meaningful development. Indeed, it may well act as a helpful template for other councils under No Overall Control to draw upon.

Fundamental in enabling and informing the Agreement was externally facilitated activity across the political leadership of the council exploring the difficulties and tensions that have been demonstrated in councillor relationships over many years. This process is recognised as having been challenging for all involved and great credit goes to everybody for their willingness to participate.

Strong leadership and collaborative working have been shown on a cross-party basis to secure consensus and the Agreement. Key elements have been woven into the Constitution and certain changes have already been implemented following the Agreement, such as the switch to the Opposition chairing the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Audit Committee. The next step should be translating more of the core elements of the Agreement into action. This would usefully include scheduling and commencing the joint meetings of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet and the meetings between the Leader and Deputy Leader of both the Administration and the Opposition.

The corporate peer challenge outlined a widespread desire both politically and managerially for greater time and space to be dedicated to strategic thinking and for people to have the opportunity to capitalise upon and share knowledge and expertise from across different Portfolios, directorates and services in order to collectively 'problem-solve', inform strategic direction and develop a greater sense of shared endeavour. The council has responded to this by establishing dedicated time for Cabinet to meet informally by themselves and jointly with the senior managerial leadership. The feedback is that this is fostering greater strategic focus and shared understanding. Additionally, 'Think Space' sessions have been established for senior managers and they very much welcome the way in which this has aided strategic discussion and collaboration in the organisation.

The recent changes in leadership positions on Overview and Scrutiny that we referred to earlier are settling and the atmosphere in this sphere feels constructive and positive. Good progress is seen to have been made in the development of the individual and collective work plans for the Committees. Overview and Scrutiny members indicated their desire to develop the Overview element further, including helping to shape key projects and initiatives, inform policy and aid service improvement. They are also keen to have the opportunity to engage constructively

with Portfolio Holders through their attendance at Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings.

The corporate peer challenge highlighted there being many positive aspects to elected member development in the council. This included the induction process, training and development in more technical and quasi-judicial areas such as Licensing and Planning and the council tapping increasingly into provision of elected member training at the national level, in particular through the Local Government Association. We also highlighted the scope to enhance things further, adopting a more personalised and tailored approach to identifying and meeting individual councillor needs. This need to move to a more comprehensive on-going programme, supporting councillors in their development across the wide range of roles that they hold, should be a focus moving forward.

We spoke a year ago of a very small number of councillors impacting negatively on the morale and reputation of the organisation. Unfortunately, elements of this behaviour continue. This has been seen in the stance a very small number of councillors have adopted towards fellow elected members and officers in public forums or through social media. We have heard loudly and clearly, across a wide range and number of people internally and externally, that what is being seen and experienced behaviourally is inappropriate and it risks undermining relationships between councillors and between officers and elected members. Essentially it jeopardises the positive progress made in relationships at the senior political leadership level and by the council more generally. What is occurring is acting as a major distraction, absorbing capacity and damaging morale internally. Partner organisations are cognisant of what is happening and no doubt the general public are also forming a view.

The Group Leaders Agreement outlines core elements already included in, or to be introduced to or amended in, the Constitution. This specifically includes clauses 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 of the Constitution, under 'Political Differences and Personal Criticism', capturing a collective commitment to promoting good conduct and mutual respect between elected members and officers. This includes all elected members adhering to high standards of courtesy, mutual respect and civility in their dealings with one another and with officers and this applying in all council meetings plus any other

public meetings and in all dealings with the press and other media including the use of social media. The Group Leaders have a key role to play in ensuring their elected members uphold this.

Managing the Organisation

The council continues to be in a sound financial position. This is due, in no small part, to the hard work on its Financial Sustainability Plans, the strategic approach it demonstrates to its finances and the benefits derived from its investment portfolio. Three of the Financial Sustainability Plans that were in place at the time of the corporate peer challenge have been delivered or mainstreamed, leaving four of the original plans focused on the highest spend areas, including home to school transport and children's social care packages. There are now also new plans, with these relating to the council's proposed locality model for children and young people and Torbay's cultural assets. No savings have been required in the budget for 2025/26 and the council has been able to provide additional investment in certain areas including affordable housing and climate change initiatives.

Financial challenges for the council remain and will continue to emerge. One example is the financial risk posed to the council through the Integrated Care Organisation as a result of the financial challenges in the health sphere. Another is the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) budget plus the implications of the findings of the recent inspection in this area which should be published in the coming weeks and to which the council will need to respond. There are also risks and challenges around the 'Safety Valve' agreement relating to the Dedicated Schools Grant and then there is the question of how the council's financial position would be impacted through any structural changes under local government reorganisation. The council is both recognising and, where appropriate, acting upon such challenges and risks.

The council has established the Capital and Growth Board and the Capital Asset Management Group as part of developing a more strategic approach to, and enhancing governance around, capital funding and resources.


The organisational structure review continues and is a key next step in the incorporation of the Torbay Development Agency into the council. Inevitably, as with any in-sourcing of such a significant previously out-sourced function, challenges exist at both the practical and cultural level.

The corporate peer challenge encouraged the council to consider streamlining some of its processes and its meeting structure in order to increase capacity through making the best use of people's time. The council has reviewed its decision-making framework and increased officer delegation arrangements and this is felt to have delivered positive improvements.

The council's new 'Our People Strategy' has been established. This has helped to develop an increasing focus on equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the organisation. The appointment and work of an officer dedicated to leading the EDI strategic agenda is seen to be being impactful. Also, a number of staff Equality Networks have been established, although these are recognised as being in their infancy still, and the council's inclusion strategy is currently being consulted upon. The need to make EDI much more central is recognised and, as we highlighted through the corporate peer challenge, this area requires clear corporate leadership and ownership.

The introduction of the Staff Awards, which took place in September 2024, is hugely welcomed and saw over 150 nominations. The 'Managers Framework' is a central element of the People Strategy but progress there feels challenging. This comes back to the point about the organisation being stretched, with managers indicating they are struggling to prioritise dedicating the time and effort necessary both to helping design core aspects of the Framework relating to their field and undertaking the training itself. It will be important to the council's continued improvement that people at this level recognise the importance of their role as 'manager' and for the council to support them in being able to prioritise the continued development of their managerial skills.

As is the case with many organisations, there are mixed messages around the 'return to the workplace'. Some people indicated they value the devolving of responsibility to directorates to manage things within the council's overall policy, whilst others are



seeking greater consistency across the organisation. A specific challenge that exists, which we assume can be relatively easily resolved, is in ensuring teams or groups of staff have the space to come together for key scheduled activities, such as team meetings or ‘away days’.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Torbay Council for undertaking the Progress Review. As we outlined earlier, the organisation has clearly embraced the recommendations from the corporate peer challenge in April 2024 and driven forward change and improvement in a range of areas in response.

We appreciate that the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation 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 on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South-West region, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be reached via paul.clarke@local.gov.uk