


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

East Staffordshire Borough Council

1st November 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

East Staffordshire Borough Council (ESBC) undertook a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during December 2021 and subsequently published the report and action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place following the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including:

- The action plan and how this aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- Peer reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs
- Discussion on any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank the council for its commitment to sector led improvement. This 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 ESBC took place on 1st November 2022.

The progress review focused on each of the recommendations from the CPC but also included a wide-ranging conversation. This note is not intended to capture all of the details of the discussion but provide an overview of progress since the CPC in December 2021.

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

- Cllr Marc Bayliss – Leader of Worcester City Council and West Mercia Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner

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- Rob Mitchell - CEX, Charnwood Borough Council
 - Emma Foy - Director of Corporate Services, West Lindsey DC
 - Pranali Parikh - Director for Growth and Regeneration, Melton BC
 - James Millington, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

Peers met with the council over the course of 2 hours with the following representatives:

Cabinet

- Cllr George Allen – Leader of the Council and Economic Growth Portfolio
- Cllr Bev Ashcroft – Cabinet Member for Tourism and Cultural Development
- Cllr Bernard Peters – Cabinet Member for Communities and Housing Standards
- Cllr Ray Faulkner – Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change
- Cllr Steve Sankey – Cabinet Member for Finance, Treasury Management and Communications

Cabinet Support Members – Cllr Adam Clarke and Cllr Mike Metcalfe

Corporate Management Team:

- Andy O'Brien – Chief Executive
- Sal Khan – Head of Service
- Mark Rizk – Head of Service
- Thomas Deery – Interim Head of Regeneration

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The peer team observed an increased sense of collaboration and synergy between ESBC's Top Team. The level of discussion and alignment of priorities had a different feel from the CPC in December 2021 and it is clear that the Cabinet and CMT are putting a concerted effort into this. The peer team felt there was a similar sense of ambition to the place but the greater alignment between the political and officer leadership would likely lead to better delivery of outcomes for the Borough. To support this, the peer team would emphasise that although progress has been made in response to recommendation 1 the benefit of continuing to create space for the Top Team and developing a programme, beyond that which is already in place around finance, remains of benefit to ESBC and its ambitions.

In most recommendations the peer team heard how the council has already made some good progress or had plans in place. The peer team emphasise the importance of continuing to monitor and review progress against recommendations to ensure delivery.

Recommendation 1 - Invest in building relationships and trust across the political and managerial leadership teams. A comprehensive programme could include joint member and senior officer visits to other councils; a LGA Top Team programme to appreciate the respective roles; exploration of good collaboration and constructive challenge; and a review of policies such as values and behaviours to underpin the cultural changes which need to be made.

Since the peer team was onsite in December 2021 there has been significant changes to the political leadership of the council. This included the resignation of the Leader in March 2022, with Cllr George Allen then appointed as Leader, and changes to the Cabinet. Additionally, ESBC's scrutiny function was reviewed to better reflect the Corporate Plan priorities, with new Chairs appointed in May 2022.



Following these changes to the council's Top Team ESBC has scoped out coaching and development support for councillors to be rolled-out from November 2022. Initially this is focused on finance but will provide further approaches to improve team working. The finance training has been commissioned by an external provider and available to all councillors, as well as Cabinet Members, as ESBC is keen to ensure that all Members are aware of the financial position of the council, decision making and financial challenges – and able to articulate how financial resources are aligned to the council vision.

The peer team also heard about greater collaboration now taking place across political groups through the political group leaders. This has included the new Leader reaching out to the opposition group leader, working closer together and building a better relationship with the rest of the opposition group. The CEX and Leader have been regularly meeting with the leader of the opposition and leader of the Independent Alliance to review ESBC's Constitution and ensure it is working effectively for the council. This has been led by the council's newly appointed Monitoring Officer and following sign-off by group leaders is due for approval in December 2022.

The peer team were pleased to hear about some of the progress in this area and that the initial focus on financial literacy will now move beyond this to deepen understanding. Although it was clear from the time on site during this progress review there was a greater sense of synergy between Cabinet and CMT, the peer team emphasised that this recommendation was more broadly about ESBC's Top Team coming together and further building relationships and trust to enhance its working. The council confirmed this was the plan and the intention is to do this. The use of external support already utilised by ESBC is positive and should be further considered in future. The LGA would be pleased to be able to support ESBC with this too.

Recommendation 2 - Ensure there is political and wide managerial alignment on the current financial position and future strategy and that this reflects those

agreed priorities. Agree the council's narrative which explains the priorities and invest time as the Leadership Team to agree the strategic approach to savings and investment which will deliver ESBC's priorities.

The council confirmed the current context being faced by ESBC, including the impact of the conflict in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis. Cabinet and CMT meet together regularly to discuss the financial position and challenges, including through the period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) setting period in December until sign-off in February.

As mentioned, the financial literacy training is being rolled-out to all councillors with the first session being delivered whilst the team were on site. This has been deliberately timed at the start of 2023/24 MTFS cycle to provide all Members with the opportunity to be aware of the context and involved from the outset. This recommendation was centred on the Cabinet setting the vision and outcomes and this being delivered through ESBC's financial strategy as an aligned top team. Discussions with the Cabinet confirmed that this has moved on significantly since the CPC and there is now a much better understanding of where and why the council is holding funding in reserves and the risks which are associated with using them to fund one off priority activities. Cabinet is now confident that it understands what the funding situation is and has clarity on the financial position for achieving its ambitions.

In order to deliver on its priorities the Cabinet has made decisions to utilise underspends in 2021/22 of £750K and underspends and investment returns in Q1 of 2022/23 of £500K to invest in tourism, waste management and regeneration, digital and asset refurbishment. The council sets the MTFS policy framework following a whole council Member-led process and previously, each year, Cabinet has carried forward underspends mapped to its priorities – but is now doing this 'in year'. The council recognises this is an evolving situation but the conversation of investing in this way is a new direction for ESBC and feels positive. The peer team endorse the council's progress in this area and encourage it to continue its approach around reviewing its risk appetite in a way which delivers the council's priorities and ensures




it maintains a sustainable financial position.

The cost of living response has been a good example of where the political and managerial leadership of ESBC is building a package of support for the community to meet current challenges. The Cabinet has been clear to prioritise warm spaces in places which are easily accessible such as community centres and village halls. Following the identification of areas of good practice in other councils ESBC has allocated £500 of grant funding per identified space initially, but further funding may become available. This is due to be launched imminently and up to £60K will be made available overall. ESBC is also exploring potentially working with Trent & Dove Housing Association and other community groups to deliver 'warm spaces' for residents. The council is also looking at the relationship between climate change and cost of living, developing a project focused on reviewing data on a Lower Super Output Area basis and potentially funding smart thermostats for residents so that they can be better in control of their energy usage.

During the original CPC the council reflected on the discussions it was having on housing growth within the Borough and the impact on waste collection. ESBC confirmed it is using software to look at this issue to explore whether the council can deliver 14 rounds instead of the existing 13 to cope with the extra housing growth.

The peer team felt that ESBC had made some good progress in this area, and it was clear that the top team is carefully considering the financial position of the council at the same time as delivering against its priorities and responding to emerging challenges.


Recommendation 3 - Together, Members and officers should review and strengthen ESBC's Member Development Programme to ensure that training and support is available and welcomed throughout councillors' time in office.



ESBC has been refreshing its plans for how to effectively support Members. This includes Cllr Adam Clarke being appointed as Member lead on developing the Member Induction process following the all-out elections in May 2023. To ensure this is Member-led it includes engaging with existing councillors on their experience in past years – either from the perspective of a councillor who was newly elected or re-elected – and identifying which courses and support is needed by all Members or those returning, the length of sessions, timing and phasing of this support. The focus will be an ongoing induction process rather than trying to do too much too soon following elections. Alongside this ESBC is also developing a new Member intranet which will be introduced following the elections. This has included good cross-party discussions through the working group to develop the agreed approach.

Ahead of the elections ESBC has delivered training for the Audit Committee and Licensing Committee and support was provided for the Chairs of Scrutiny in July 2022 by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), with a plan to repeat this in May/June 2023. Planning Committee training has also been broadened out to those Members not on the Committee in order to provide wider understanding of this important area. The council has been arranging ongoing support to Members in leadership and other positions and utilising LGA Leadership Programmes – including the scrutiny, finance and licensing programmes in 2022/23. ESBC recognises there is further work to do in this area to increase Member engagement in the development opportunities available to capitalise on these to benefit the delivery of council business.

The peer team considered this to be a good approach – particularly in regard to ESBC’s development of activity following the elections in 2023. This is a considered approach and will provide a comprehensive plan to ensure councillors have the support and tools they need to be effective in their role. The organisation is aware of the issues of some Members not engaging but does appear to be providing opportunities to be inclusive.




Recommendation 4 - Monitor capacity in key areas of the organisation to deliver your ambitions and priorities e.g., regeneration, tourism and climate change and adjust accordingly to deal with pressures

ESBC recognises it has had a challenging year in progressing some of its ambitions. In March 2022 the Towns Fund business case was discussed at Full Council meeting. A key aspect of this was moving Burton upon Trent library into the Market Hall and this did not make it through to approval. Additionally, the plans to work with the University of Wolverhampton and then Staffordshire University did not come to fruition despite ESBC working hard to deliver on these. However, ESBC was invited to bid for the Levelling Up Fund and it is hoped that this will make it possible to realise ESBC's ambitions. ESBC are acutely aware of the challenges around regeneration due to the current position of the construction industry and the impact of inflation but remains focused on how it can deliver on its priorities.

To provide additional capacity ESBC has invested in a chief officer as Interim Head of Regeneration to take forward regeneration through this critical period. The council discussed how it now has confidence that it has a good team in place to deliver in the timescales required. ESBC will use internal resources to deliver the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) programme and as the Towns Fund delivery becomes more heavily monitored will identify monitoring resources separate to project delivery. In resourcing the programmes ESBC will utilise a blend of internal, commissioned expertise and experts to work closely with residents to ensure delivery.

The peer team heard how ESBC has been progressing its ambitions around tourism. The Tourism Partnership has been launched and there will be separate forums for Burton and Uttoxeter. Activity has so far included an audit of tourism activity, website redesign and the council is completing a place branding exercise. ESBC noted how the peer review had re-emphasised the value in the council getting out to other areas and described how valuable it was recently visiting Birkenhead, and seeing how Wirral Council had worked with a community enterprise company to uncover music subcultures. ESBC is now reviewing how this can be applied in East Staffordshire and provide similar tourism opportunities. To support its ambitions the council is



recruiting to two tourism posts – one has recently been filled – and has restructured where the tourism function sits in ESBC, moving it from Communities and Open Spaces to now sit under the manager with responsibility for Cultural Services. This is a better fit and also increases capacity within the wider team.

Addressing climate change is a key ambition for the administration and ESBC has recruited an additional climate change officer. The council is also due to install six electric vehicle charging points into a town centre carpark as a testbed for consideration for rolling-out further across the Borough.

The peer team agreed that there remained clear ambitions for the council in regeneration, growth and supporting the economy and community of East Staffordshire. The group discussed how this has been supported in the short term through the underspends but that the additional climate change capacity is now mainstreamed within the budget and tourism officers are being funded from the 2021/22 underspend with a view to this then being mainstreamed following proof of concept. ESBC is aligning its resources to deliver against its ambitions but will need to confirm spend is in place for future years in due course through the MTFS process.

Recommendation 5 - In delivering your changes to scrutiny arrangements, identify and provide training and support for Members and officers on the hallmarks of good scrutiny to ensure that these arrangements provide a robust check and balance and are as effective as possible.

As noted in recommendation 1 and 3 the group discussed how following the CPC scrutiny committees had now been more closely aligned with ESBC's Corporate Plan and that training has since been provided by the CfGS.

ESBC recognises there is further work to do to engage all scrutiny Members and will continue to review how it can best ensure that scrutiny is effective for the council. The peer team supports ESBC in its approach in maintaining momentum in this




important area.

Recommendation 6 - Continue working with partners to capitalise on the joint work delivered in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a particular opportunity to consider how to work with Staffordshire County Council and health partners to address health inequalities and to also further explore the potential around shared services.

ESBC is continuing the positive momentum of working with partners and organisations, building on the experience of the Covid-19 response. The council's scrutiny committee played an important role in this, bringing a report to Cabinet with recommendations on how to better work with voluntary organisations and groups which had been established as a result of the Covid-19 response.

Since the CPC Members and officers have re-emphasised the focus and importance of working with the voluntary and community sector. In 2017/18 the previous administration at ESBC cut its voluntary and community sector funding in response to the challenges of austerity, but this year has proactively become much closer to the sector in developing a Voluntary and Community Sector Engagement Strategy with Support Staffordshire in June 2022. The council has established the Voluntary Sector Forum to have a direct relationship with the sector and to better understand their views. The first Forum was recently held online and was a positive networking session, with ESBC keen to generate the two-way conversation and build on this platform. Additionally, the council now provide further funding and commissioning opportunities – and there is opportunity to consider building on this approach further in 2023/24.

The group discussed the UKSPF and how community and voluntary groups are engaged in this and how the council is working through a Village Enhancement Programme. This is important as a huge amount of council activity is focused on the urban areas but there is a large number of villages and other settlements across the



Borough. ESBC is identifying how the UKSPF can deliver a programme of more rural regeneration projects and how working with groups within the voluntary sector can bring this forward.


ESBC continues to work with Everyone Active and the obesity management pathfinder (Better Health Staffordshire). The council also maintains close attention on the Covid-19 position, always prepared to act depending on where the Borough is in relation to infection rates and response.

The peer team reflected that there were positive views expressed by the council's partners during the CPC with a desire to maintain the momentum on partnership working. The voluntary and community sector was especially keen on direct contact with ESBC so it is good to see how this recommendation is progressing and the council is continuing to work closely with partners to capitalise on other joint working opportunities.

Recommendation 7 - Building on the positive partnership work with Staffordshire County Council in relation to the Towns Deal, there is now an opportunity to proactively engage in the emerging County Deal discussions to support ESBC's regeneration and growth objectives.

Earlier this year the Staffordshire Leaders' Board was set up to bring the County and districts together more formally and enable them to seek extra powers and money from Government to improve services and tackle issues such as climate change and health inequalities. ESBC's Leader is vice chair of the Leaders' Board and in this role is keen to ensure that the Board has clarity of purpose and delivers outcomes across Staffordshire.

The peer team heard there is agreement across the County and districts that the preference is against a county-wide Mayoral model, so the emphasis is on effective two tier working. ESBC is clear that from working with the County on regeneration that Staffordshire County Council sees its role as facilitating districts across the



rounds of funding on town centre regeneration - so there remains close relations with the County and ESBC on the Town Deal and other opportunities.

A recent example of where the Leaders' Board was seen as being particularly effective was in the discussions on Investment Zones. The Board was well placed to respond at short notice through collaborative discussions and formulate a position across Staffordshire. Opportunities like this to use the forum nimbly across the county and in areas such as Strategic Planning could be beneficial. The group did also discuss the current challenges around asylum seekers and the Strategic Migration Partnership. There are challenges in supporting this through the current processes and how the partnership responds to this.

The peer team was pleased to hear how this relationship seems to be working well and ESBC's commitment to ensuring that positive outcomes are delivered for the benefit of communities.

Recommendation 8 - Continue to make the most of the 'Politics not Personalities' agenda to ensure that across all parties in ESBC, the tone of debate is both respectful and courteous, recognising that ESBC needs to be a leader in setting the tone of civility and respect in all its dealings, internally and externally.

This agenda remains important to the council. The new Monitoring Officer will continue to deal with issues as they arise and the political groups will address persistent issues with elected Members which can take up a lot of time and negatively impact the reputation and work of the council.

The peer team heard about positive work being done across services to deal with Member concerns. For instance, in regeneration the team is making an increased effort to engage with Members on an individual basis if there are particular queries or concerns and holding regular engagement and briefing sessions helps to ensure the tone of debate is focused on the issues.

Recommendation 9 - Communications – shout loud about the council's successes and achievements!

ESBC has been focusing greater attention on this to improve its practice. Within the latest survey to residents this has included a question asking how people prefer to be communicated with. Results will be discussed at the next Leader and Deputy Leader Meeting to inform future ESBC activity. The place branding work which has recently been undertaken will be reported in December and is anticipated to be rich in detail for both regeneration and tourism. Additionally, the council's Communications Plan and associated communications analytics are reviewed each month as a group of Leaders and Deputy Leaders and Chief Officers to look at what this is showing regarding the council's reach.

Mechanisms to extend the council's communications include the council website upgrade, which is due to be completed in December and ESBC is undertaking options appraisals with other councils in the county in relation to chatbot and live chat facilities. A council app is now also being developed.


The peer team reflected that it was good to see that ESBC was looking at this and reviewing how to move this forward using a blend of approaches. Some of this work, particularly through the website, will also support ESBC's approach to digitisation, customer access and transformation.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank ESBC for undertaking the LGA CPC progress review.

We appreciate that 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.

Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Helen is available to discuss any further support the council requires Helen.murray@local.gov.uk.