

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Sevenoaks District Council

24th November 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2021 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately twelve months after the council published the CPC action plan, 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 how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank Sevenoaks for their 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 Sevenoaks District Council took place remotely on 24th November 2022.

The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following headings:

Communities and Place

1. Build on recent place leadership work – consider developing a renewed, partnership-led, long-term vision for the district, residents and businesses
2. Complement the council's existing project-based community engagement work with more open, bottom-up, conversational approaches
3. Use service data and community networks to enhance the council's understanding of its diverse and emerging communities

Economic Development and Regeneration

4. Consider the optimum balance between the council's scale of ambition and availability of resources
5. Explore the scope for a managed increase in Quercus Housing's affordable housing delivery outputs
6. Consider the full range of options for additional modest-scale market value and affordable housing activity – 'massive small'
7. Review the external specialist skills to challenge viability appraisals and negotiate S106 agreements with developers
8. Use the council's influence to optimise the outcomes from the district's strategic development sites
9. Consider developing a proposition for inward investment and development as part of the emerging economic development strategy

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

- Cllr Darren Rodwell, Leader of London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of Breckland Council
- Damian Roberts, Chief Executive, Surrey Heath Borough Council
- Judith Atkinson, Strategic Director, Local Partnerships

As the original Peer Challenge Manager for the LGA was not available. Gill Elliott stepped in as the LGA manager for the progress review.

The peer team met virtually via Zoom over the course of four and a half hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Cllr Peter Fleming – Leader of the Council
- Dr Pav Ramewal – Chief Executive
- Sarah Robson – Chief Officer People & Places

- Richard Morris – Chief Officer Planning & Regulatory
- Detlev Munster – Strategic Head – Commercial & Property
- Adrian Rowbotham – Chief Officer Finance & Trading

3. Progress Review - Feedback

As a team we found that the Council has really embraced the recommendations made in the original CPC in November 2021. We saw evidence of some significant progress as an organisation and the creation of real momentum along a transformational journey rather than simply a tick box approach to actions. This was particularly the case for community engagement. The Council has also brought forward a number of new initiatives and key strategies and plans since the CPC including the Local Plan 2040, a new Community Plan and the Sevenoaks “So Much More” campaign.

Communities and Place

It’s clear that a new style of engagement is emerging, one that seeks to empower people and leave communities stronger as well as giving the council the information it needs to target its resources more effectively. The Council is developing approaches with town and parish councils as well as community and neighbourhood groups to gain further information, data and insights into the needs and aspirations of local communities. It is seeking to maximise the benefit of the new Census data and ONS (Office of National Statistics) data to develop information and analysis of local communities. A Customer Insights Team has been established to broaden the range, use and analysis of service data to enhance knowledge about communities and inform service initiatives

The Council’s “Here to Help” project around help with the cost of living is also a strong offering for the community. Other initiatives being progressed include a new community mobilisation officer funded by Kent County Council’s (KCC) Helping Hands Fund; a community empowerment toolkit and an online community hub which goes live in early 2023. The Hello Lamp Post” project has been a creative way to engage with residents and visitors on the street. The council recognises that the Hello Lamp Post project has the potential to develop further in the future.

We would encourage the Council to continue trying to give a voice to those residents who are often “harder to hear”. Trust takes time to build and engaging with newer or emerging Black and minority ethnic communities requires sustained effort, but these efforts will bring rewards.

Economic Development and Regeneration

We were impressed to see that since the CPC the Council has delivered a new long-term Economic Development Strategy and a Place Campaign to encourage inward investment. It is continuing to work with partners and rural landowners to develop land that is not suitable for agriculture, but which could be developed for business use.


Following consultation, the Local Plan 2040 plan contains three key considerations: health and wellbeing; net zero carbon emissions and design excellence. The Plan sets out a programme for securing good growth which seeks to maximise available developable land by analysing sites one by one. The Council has clearly embraced the “Massive Small” agenda. There has been some impressive progress on hard won and resource intensive projects. It was good to see that the Council is engaging with developers and having open conversations which will help to build its reputation as a trusted partner with a track record of achievement and a good place for investment. The CPC recommended that the Council consider the full range of options for additional modest scale market value and affordable housing activity – to further build on its positive progress with “Massive Small”. There has been a well-defined and consolidated pipeline of development activity since the CPC. The Council has approved lending to Quercus Housing of £15m over ten years to deliver affordable housing in the district, aimed at key workers. As of October 31st, 15 units have been delivered in the High Street Swanley with a further 11 units in Edenbridge for affordable rent. The Council has worked in partnership with the West Kent Housing Association (WKHA) to bring forward 11 units of supported accommodation in the district at Vine Court Road and Orchards Close which has helped relieve pressure on temporary accommodation. The Council has also worked in partnership with the charity HfT to lease Stay Green House in Edenbridge, providing 7 units of affordable rented accommodation for single mothers and single women.

In our recommendations we asked the Council to consider the optimum balance between its ambitions and availability of resources including human resources. We were pleased to note that the Council has brought in additional specialist talent and skills where needed to take the Economic Development strategy forward. The Council recognises that some workforce turnover can be helpful in progressing projects that may only need specialist skills at particular times. They also recognise that in order to deliver the Council's ambitious agenda, it is vital that they continue to provide a work environment that is effective at attracting and retaining a talented workforce in a highly competitive environment.

There is a tangible sense of energy around the Council going forward which together with a positive organisational culture and modern working practices, will help to retain valuable skills despite the temptations from the private sector and larger Councils. The Council is clear on what is important to it and staff are working well with colleagues across the council to share the resources needed to deliver results. This 'one team' approach to resource and talent management is very welcome.

The work done by the Council to produce its Investment Zone bid for DHLUC is an example of an organisation that has been able to step up to a challenge when it needs to. We believe that the work for the bid will not be wasted as it puts the Council and its partners "on the starting block" for other opportunities. It also provides momentum and potential for a locally led investment zone. It is clear to us that despite Kent County Council's issues with its finances, the Council is still working collaboratively with the County and other partners including large corporations.

We would point to some particular challenges for the Council, including securing greater engagement from health sector colleagues on the preventative health agenda linked to the wider determinants of health and KCC's financial challenges and any knock-on consequences for boroughs and districts. We understand that there has been a set-back in Swanley where the Council was unable to gain agreement to its' major regeneration scheme for the area from the Planning Committee. However, we would urge the Council to maintain its commitment to investment and regeneration, to wider engagement, and continuous improvement. Notwithstanding these challenges, staying positive and staying "fleet of foot" will reap benefits. It will be important over the next two years to use this newly gained confidence and mandate from residents to "doubledown" on plans whilst at the same time ensuring that all



Members have an opportunity to play an active part in the delivery of these plans. This includes the engagement of backbench members ahead of the forthcoming elections in May. The Council should be thinking about new Member induction now and should also use the sessions for prospective candidates as an opportunity to set out its agenda.

Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Sevenoaks District Council for undertaking an 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.

Will Brooks (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and his e-mail address is william.brooks1@local.gov.uk