

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

City of York Council

9 December 2024

Feedback



**Corporate Peer Challenge**



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# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during February 2024 and published the full report.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately ten months after the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the early progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's RAG rated CPC Action Plan.
- 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 City of York Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This 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 City of York Council took place onsite on 9 December 2024

The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

1. **Recommendation 1:** Clarify a strong and consistent narrative that drives the ability of the organisation to take advantage of the opportunities available to York
2. **Recommendation 2:** Be clear on the need to prioritise the ambition of the new council plan to focus on key delivery.
3. **Recommendation 3:** Build on the clear leadership of the new administration

to develop a more mature corporate culture that improves appropriate behaviours and relationships within the organisation.

4. **Recommendation 4:** Consider how the corporate culture and senior arrangements of the organisation can help shape and deliver key priorities.
5. **Recommendation 5:** Consider how the Corporate Management Team can establish a collective responsibility for the delivery of key priorities and provide clear and consistent positive leadership to the many hard working and dedicated staff.
6. **Recommendation 6:** Put in place a robust performance management framework that recognises and rewards success and has clear accountability for delivery
7. **Recommendation 7:** Ensure improved staff engagement that clearly communicates the shared aims ambitions and priorities of the organisation and celebrates success
8. **Recommendation 8:** Establish a well evidenced and robust single version of the medium-term financial position that is collectively owned and understood.
9. **Recommendation 9:** Improve the financial literacy of the organisation, financial controls and financial grip that focuses on the big picture.
10. **Recommendation 10:** Develop a clear plan to deliver savings that includes a properly resourced strategic program for change with sound business cases that flow through a strong and more robust governance framework.
11. **Recommendation 11:** Ensure there are appropriate support resources and structures to enable all members to undertake their respective roles including training, timeliness of papers and access to information.
12. **Recommendation 12:** Develop a clear corporate strategy on how City of York Council can better utilise the desire capacity and ability of partners to help the city improve and achieve its ambition
13. **Recommendation 13:** Develop stronger, positive and strategic corporate relationships which build on localised good practice

14. **Recommendation 14:** Properly understand the relationship with the Combined Authority and its role in enabling CYC to deliver its key priorities.
15. **Recommendation 15:** Implement an action plan to address these recommendations with urgency and pace that moves from single tactical interventions to a more strategic corporate approach.

For this Progress Review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- **Lead Peer:** Sara Todd (Chief Executive, Trafford Borough Council)
- **Member Peer:** Councillor Peter Marland (Leader of Milton Keynes Council)
- **Senior Officer Peer:** Mark Fowler (Deputy Chief Executive and Corporate Director – Population Wellbeing, Luton Borough Council)
- **Senior Officer Peer:** James Dunn (Director Prosperity and Investment, Telford and Wrekin Council)
- **Shadow Officer Peer:** Lo'ren Spence (Project Manager, Modernisation Team, Trafford Borough Council)
- **LGA Peer Challenge Manager:** Ernest Opuni (LGA Senior Regional Advisor)

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

#### **Response from City of York Council to the February 2024 CPC**

Out of the CPC's 15 recommendations, the council's Action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are completed or in progress with none not to be progressed.

Following the CPC in February 2024 City of York Council has created a Corporate Improvement Framework and Action Plan which meets the peer recommendations. It embeds the council's continued ethos of improvement by '*working together to improve and make a difference*'.

The council's journey is themed around the framework and peer recommendations. The framework provides the structure to the council's continuous journey of improvement using four themes:

1. Strengthen strategic leadership: embedding clear expectations for our senior managers to work as one council delivering a shared vision throughout the organisation
2. One City, one Council: co-designing an internal and external approach to what it means to work together in partnership, uniting the council, officers, members and partners together, as one team
3. Harness the commitment to the City to deliver ambition: developing and implementing a communication strategy, establishing different activities to strengthen partnerships and engage the workforce
4. Build a strong foundation: embedding council plan priorities and the performance framework, reviewing how we support personal development plans and service plans, with a refreshed internal governance structure

The 12-month Action Plan is grouped around the framework and sets actions around:

- a) how the council operates to meet the objectives set in the Council Plan
- b) the council's continuous journey of improvement
- c) being responsive to challenges whilst ensuring that the council's services and its workforce are adaptive to change
- d) recommendations from peers

As at November 2024 (8 months into the council's 12-month action plan) the majority of the actions were complete or underway with substantial headway being made to meet the peer recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge. This has been made possible thanks to efforts of the council's dedicated and hard-working workforce, partners and the city's community all believing in York as place, the Council as an employer and good partner relationships.

Below is detail on the progress against each recommendation as fed back by the council. The peer challenge team has fed back its thoughts against what was shared by City of York Council on 9 December 2024.

## 4. Feedback from the Team

### Overall Messages

There has been a level of positive change evidenced since the CPC report evidenced in the significant amount of activity. This included:

- Restructure progressed and more clarity and stability as a result.
- Improved financial grip – co-producing budget and a clear way of place working
- Approach to joint commissioning and place in Health and Care will go live on 1 April 2025

There feels to be a more collaborative and cohesive Corporate Management Team than at the time of the Corporate Peer Challenge. This owed as much to the timing of the visit and the state of flux which existed at a time in which the council was embarking on a major organisational restructure. The sense of things having settled down in the interim was noticeable.

Internal engagement has improved (for example the 'Leading Together' initiative) and more visible leadership from Senior Members and Senior Officers. At the time of the original peer challenge there was a significant level of communications activity being undertaken. What was less clear at that time was how effectively this messaging was landing with staff. From the feedback provided during the Progress Review there is a clearer sense of a more unified, collegiate leadership team.

There are some examples of positive engagement with external partners. Notably this came through in much of the work ongoing to positively progress the improvement of wider health and care outcomes for all of the city's communities. There was also very positive feedback on the impact of the work of the Interim Director of City Development in the intervening months between the CPC in February 2024 and the Progress Review in December 2024.

Feedback about the administration's political approach continues to be positive.

### Areas to consider

- *Continue to better define and tell the story of 'why' you are doing things:* This related to one of the big messages from the original CPC about the value of a clear narrative and 'story of York as a place'. The volume of work that has been undertaken is without question and there is significant level of detail about **what** is being delivered. There is the opportunity for the **why** messages

to be strengthened as part of a truly compelling narrative about the York journey and the impact sought from activity.

This will also contribute to the work the council is doing on continuously improving staff engagement. The clarity of the 'why' will contribute positively to embedding any change sought and provide a means of assessing the degree to which efforts are successful. This will always take time to achieve and the team would encourage the council to continue with this as a longer term area of focus.

- *Even greater level of prioritisation is needed:* The ambition of the council under the leadership of the administration which has been in control since May 2023 is clearly providing significant energy behind all the council is delivering, contributing to the impetus behind much of the hard work which is clearly. The team would encourage a focus on more prioritisation as a means of better targeting capacity. Reflections from meetings between the peer challenge team and colleagues from York on 9 December was that there is not yet a clear hierarchy of priorities which means that the feeling that everything is a priority remains.
- *There needs to be an even greater level of managing expectations of what can be achieved with the level of resource available:* This relates to both people and finance. This is on two fronts of internal organisational expectation management as well as external to the council with partners and communities.
- *Continue to develop the political and organisational maturity of the council.*
  - There is still a lot of focus on process and detail. The team would encourage the council to continue reviewing processes in order to allow for speedier decision-making and greater organisational agility.
  - Further develop your organisational self-awareness to ensure there is a strong understanding of where improvements for the council are most required. Consider how the council might seek to learn from practice elsewhere on an ongoing basis as part of the aspiration for continuous improvement. This involves the ability to take and use feedback even where it is particularly challenging.
  - The administration should take opportunities to further develop political skills. As a still relatively new administration the team would encourage consideration of external resources such as LGA Member Development Programmes to support ongoing learning. The opportunity to take this even further would involve taking opportunities for both the Executive and CMT to jointly undertake reflection and learning opportunities in the spirit of being truly a united 'Top Team'



- *There is more work required to genuinely develop stronger, positive and strategic external relationships:* The team was informed by partners that some of the engagement and relationships can still feel somewhat transactional with a focus on individual organisational objectives as opposed to collective objectives. The opportunity is to identify how a collectively owned vision for York as a place can be delivered in a spirit of true co-production and cross-sector collaboration.

Partners were very positive about the impact the Interim Director of City Development had made during her tenure. Her time was characterised very positively by partners in their conversations with the peer challenge team. She was viewed as embodying the strategic and visible external officer leadership they would like to see demonstrated by the council. They pointed out that she had articulated an ambition for both the council and the city of York that was very much welcomed by partners it during her time in the role. Her willingness to tackle previously prevailing cultural issues was also positively noted by partners. Her approach was one of being solution focussed as well as more engaging of partners.

There is a new City Director who was due to take up this role not too long after the time of the visit in December 2024. Partners felt it was incumbent upon the council's Chief Operating Officer and the new Director to maintain and build on the positivity initiated by the Interim Director. This would ensure that that visible leadership, focus on solutions and partner engagement underpinned by a clear 'can do' culture is sustained and encouraged - partners view this as being essential for York's future success.

- *A more structured and strategic approach to engaging with and influencing the Combined Authority would be of benefit. There is an opportunity to further strengthen the outcomes for the City of York as a result of being the economic driver in the sub-region:* There is the opportunity as one of only two constituents to ensure that York's voice and contribution is as prominent as possible. Seek greater clarity on how the Mayoral model can bring impact over and above what the individual constituents can deliver on their own. For example in relation to housing ambitions there would be value in considering how targets can be achieved across the wider geography of the sub-region rather than being in any way constrained by being limited to achieving targets within individual council boundaries.

The current early stage of development of the Combined Authority allows York to play a major role in positively influencing the priorities for the sub-region

provided it remains proactive in this space. The council may find value in visiting other more mature/more longstanding Combined Authorities as this may help City of York Council to get a better sense as to how the organisation can maximise opportunities to meet York's ambitions as part of this collaboration.

- *There is still more work to do on the purpose and role of the Combined Authority in delivering the priorities of City of York. 'When is it York and when York and North Yorkshire?'*

## 5. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank City of York 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.

Mark Edgell (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is [mark.edgell@local.gov.uk](mailto:mark.edgell@local.gov.uk)

## **APPENDIX: City of York Council Progress against the CPC recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1: Clarify a strong and consistent narrative that drives the ability of the organisation to take advantage of the opportunities available to York**

#### **City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:**

- CMT restructure has been finalised including the appointment of new Director of City Development
- A strong, visible and united team working together to deliver key priorities
- Revised governance structures and terms of reference established allowing dedicated time for strategic matters and ensure that cross working and opportunities are maximised
- Strong narrative of leadership from the top with new communication platforms and communication strategy to ensure that the Council plan, financial challenge and key priorities are known and understood and embed into everyday business as usual discussions
- Leadership engagement and Let's talk Leadership and the York Deal
- Phase 2 and ongoing work to define senior manager grades and responsibilities
- New internal communications strategy
- Dedicated policy and strategy meetings
- Strategic reviews
- Success of cross council working to achieve outcomes
  - Garden waste,
  - Station bridge,
  - Early help,
  - Changing lives

### **Recommendation 2: Be clear on the need to prioritise the ambition of the new council plan to focus on key delivery.**

#### **City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:**

- Within one year the majority of the Labour Manifesto pledges were achieved
- Executive and Management remain focused and ambitious with emphasis on efficiency and resource management
- Refresh of Corporate Governance Frameworks and links to the Council Plan
- Partners clarity on Council Plan; Partnership Plan and Cultural Investment Plan co-produced
- 'Golden Thread' for employees to understand the ambition, outcomes and their contribution; Council Plan, Service Plan, Team Plan, PDRs and 121
- Strategic reviews align with improved customer journey and demand management
- Update report on Council Plan achievements in September and November to Executive
  - EACH is incorporated into all decision reports
  - Performance / PDRs guidance
  - Staff communications and themes
  - Linked within the workforce strategy & action plan
- Council Plan (and Combined Authority) progress is part of standard agenda items for the Corporate Improvement Board
- 6 weekly staff meetings and Leading Together communication of the Council Plan and progress

**Recommendation 3: Build on the clear leadership of the new administration to develop a more mature corporate culture that improves appropriate behaviours and relationships within the organisation.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- LGA Assurance report in July setting the key aspects of 'how' we are developing a culture that focuses on strong relationships
- Leadership and 'Let's Talk Leadership' engagement with workforce
- Good relationship between Executive and CMT Members, role clarity and boundaries clear for effective working
- Equality at the heart of culture

- Appointment of Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- PDR Framework refresh including the Corporate behaviours and competencies at each level of the workforce
- PDR completion rates already higher than 2023
- Buddying scheme
- Trauma informed training roll out planned
- Dealing with difficult customers policy
- Staff networks continue to grow and be a strong part of culture and assisting with key policies
- Positive working relationships with Trade Unions continue

**Recommendation 4: Consider how the corporate culture and senior arrangements of the organisation can help shape and deliver key priorities.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Shared values and working together on delivering key priorities; Leading Together
- Key Three messages 6 weekly
- Open and visible leaders in the office with dedicated space
- Let's Talk Leadership
- Training and Development commitment and launch of new management development programme in the New Year
- Director blogs
- New workforce strategy and action plan

**Recommendation 5: Consider how the Corporate Management Team can establish a collective responsibility for the delivery of key priorities and provide clear and consistent positive leadership to the many hard working and dedicated staff.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Collective leadership engagement
- Engagement with staff including staff survey with follow up sessions

- Staff engagement hub – you said, we did approach and published on the intranet
- Staff empowered to make changes where they can
- Accountability and responsibility reinforced
- Positive praise and pride promoted amongst colleagues and from managers / leaders
- Promotion of cross council working in practice, many examples
  - Early help, garden waste, changing lives, local transport strategy

**Recommendation 6: Put in place a robust performance management framework that recognises and rewards success and has clear accountability for delivery**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Performance is at the heart of how we work
- Standard agendas have been reviewed
- New terms of reference and new governance structures
- Service plans format has been reviewed
- Core Services Performance Board introduced to support and focus service performance including Children's & Adults Ambition Boards which COO Chairs
- Monthly CMT focus on performance
- High energy for praise to teams and individuals
- IMPOWER award most productive top tier Council
- Education Minister and Chief Social Worker praise
- Reduction of agency numbers and spend by 38%
- Single View development continues to be explored

**Recommendation 7: Ensure improved staff engagement that clearly communicates the shared aims ambitions and priorities of the organisation and celebrates success**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- COO and Leader visit teams to celebrate success
- Strengthened internal comms and engagement
- Staff suggestion hub
- New weekly email format from COO achieving high click and read rates
- Introduction of Key Three Messages
- New screens across floorplates; information sharing
- Wealth of achievements; IMPOWER, PWC defined York as the most liveable City in the UK (only northern City to make top 10)
- Rick Gritter –Shed Seven Frontman !
- As well as many national and regional staff award recognition

**Recommendation 8: Establish a well evidenced and robust single version of the medium-term financial position that is collectively owned and understood.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- MTFS approved by Executive in Sept 2024
- Further update in November 2024.
- Huge turn in position of budget overspend – original forecast of c£11m now c£2.7m gap & expect to be balanced by March 2025
- Importance of further communication with workforce but also reinforcement that need to continue as we are doing to be sustainable
- Work with Leading Together re understanding the financial position
- Ongoing successful cost control processes
- Strategic away day for CMT
- Workshops held with partners too on the financial strategy and cost savings
- Close working with Executive on savings
- Staff encouraged to be creative and innovative with savings suggestions – including personal responses.

**Recommendation 9: Improve the financial literacy of the organisation, financial controls and financial grip that focuses on the big picture.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Refresh of the financial e-learning module
- Promotion of the savings and financial challenge to embed as part of the day-to-day culture – this has worked based on improvements made
- Partners and residents' part of engagement
- Procurement challenge board introduced
- Procurement training for new pending legislation across key officers and managers
- Plans in place to review budget manager self sufficiency
- Veritau Budget Management Memorandum Report:

*‘Overall, the findings from our review of the council’s budget management process support that it is operating well. A good framework of support is in place which is strengthened by the availability of good quality and timely data. There is also good visibility of budget position and pressures at more senior levels through corporate governance arrangements and the more bespoke arrangements developed by the council’s directorates. Effective working relationships exist between budget managers and finance support’.*

**Recommendation 10: Develop a clear plan to deliver savings that includes a properly resourced strategic program for change with sound business cases that flow through a strong and more robust governance framework.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Working as One City programme of strategic reviews under the theme of improving resident experience, becoming a more resilient council and supporting the workforce
  - Reviews underway include homelessness pathway, joint committee with health and integrated neighbourhoods' teams, contract management and accelerating health communities
- Working as One City Board established
- Appointed a Head of Transformation (temp)
- Business cases being worked up
- Recognition of extra capacity, development of secondment opportunities



- Growing our own staff to undertake these reviews without consultants has been a key message

**Recommendation 11: Ensure there are appropriate support resources and structures to enable all members to undertake their respective roles including training, timeliness of papers and access to information.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Creation of a project team in Democratic Services with the specific aim of updating and improving both the Member Induction Programme and ongoing Member Training Programme, with work beginning in the New Year;
- Continued oversight of the updated Programmes by the Audit and Governance Committee;
- Signposting to an updated Member portal will be in place by the end of the financial year;
- Currently in the process of carrying out a review of Scrutiny at the Council, conducted by CfGS (with the support of the LGA);
- Review will consider all aspects of improving scrutiny, committee organisation and workloads, committee methods of working, meeting schedules, and staffing support;
- Review will also consider how best to integrate the independent members into the scrutiny process;
- Cross-party Constitution Working Group continues to meet, with recommended amendments being presented incrementally to Audit and Governance Committee;
- Recognition that the Constitution is never ‘finished’, and is a living document;
- First major constitutional amendments approved 21 November 2024

**Recommendation 12: Develop a clear corporate strategy on how City of York Council can better utilise the desire capacity and ability of partners to help the city improve and achieve its ambition**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Partner workshops held seeking feedback on CPC and future working
- Creation of a partnership approach and annual programme of partner meetings
- New Place Making Partnerships created – first meeting in February 2025 – Agenda includes the City-wide response to the refreshed Local Plan and the National planning Policy Framework
- CMT now part of City Partners meetings with Executive members to ensure proactively maximise opportunities
- Health and Care Partnership – COO Chair and Place Lead. Strong presence on board across the Council from members and officers – acknowledged that Board is working very effectively with strong ambition for future integration

**Recommendation 13: Develop stronger, positive and strategic corporate relationships which build on localised good practice**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation

- Strategic discussions with University of York Executive and CMT
- City Centre Symposium – April 2025
- York Central Development – significant progress
- York Health and Care Partnership
- Work with the ICB
- Local Care partnerships to improve population outcome and reduce health inequalities
- Agreeing priorities aligned with York Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership Strategy

**Recommendation 14: Properly understand the relationship with the Combined Authority and its role in enabling CYC to deliver its key priorities.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- Successful creation of the Combined Authority and delivery of the elections for the appointment of the new mayor in May.
- As a Team we have embraced the new relationship with the CA (and NYC) with energy and been responsive and structured to opportunities available in a timely manner to maximise potential
- Excellent working relationships established at pace with ease and authenticity, York is well positioned and ready with pipeline projects to meet the council plan agenda.
- Investment from the CA is in the region of c£18m (for CYC and City Projects)– including funding net zero initiatives, feasibility study for an energy park, brownfield sites to accelerate affordable homes, EV charging, City Centre spatial plan and regeneration, movement and place plan and cultural passports for young people
- Local growth plan links

**Recommendation 15: Implement an action plan to address these recommendations with urgency and pace that moves from single tactical interventions to a more strategic corporate approach.**

City of York Council progress in relation to this recommendation:

- April – Final Peer Recommendations received
- May – Peer Review report published including draft Corporate Improvement Framework
- June – consultation with staff and residents and Scrutiny on action plan to meet the peer recommendations
- July - Leader at Decision Session approved the Corporate Improvement Framework and Action Plan
- Monthly progress reports to Corporate Improvement Board chaired by Chief Operating Officer
- November – Leader Decision Session approved update report on the action plan