

Corporate Peer Challenge

Progress Review

Colchester City Council

27 July 2023





Context

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Local Government Associations (LGA's) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) process. The purpose of the progress review is to support councils in implementing their action plan following the CPC with an opportunity for:

- Feedback from the peer team on the progress made by the Council against the CPC recommendations and action plan.
- A sounding board and discussions 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 and design ways of capitalising or navigating any significant changes in the local operating environment. This includes any new opportunities or obstacles that may have come into focus since the peer team were 'on-site'.

This was the next stage in an ongoing, open, and transparent relationship that Colchester City Council (CCC) has with the LGA. The Council has clearly demonstrated it is open to peer feedback, support, and challenge in aiding the councils ongoing work on improvement.

Progress

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


- Cllr Stephen Darling, Liberal Democrat Member Peer Torbay Council
- Donna Nolan, Chief Executive Peer, Watford Borough Council
- Gary Hughes Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

The peer team initially completed a desk top review of the latest information, performance information and strategic progress which was then considered when the team met over the course of a day on the 27 July 2023 with the leadership team, councillors, staff, and stakeholders from the Council.

Prior to the progress review, the peer team received:

- an updated position statement.
- a rag rated action plan progress report and
- many supporting documents.

It was great to be invited to CCC's recently refurbished Hybrid Hub at Rowan House, Colchester to undertake this Progress Review. As the building was being refurbished the last time the CPC took place, it was fantastic to see its transformation into a high quality, flexible working space. The team also noted and supports the open and accessible approach adopted by the Chief Executive and her senior team of locating themselves within the open plan office. The building had only recently been opened and we encourage all CCC staff to utilise this excellent hybrid working space.



It was clear from the documentation and the discussions the team undertook that CCC have made significant progress against the actions identified by the CPC.

Leadership changes.

Following previous years of the Council being run via a joint administration, CCC now has a Liberal Democrat minority administration following the local elections in May 2023, with a supply and confidence agreement with the Labour Group in place. From the peer teams meeting with councillors, it was clear that CCC continues to build on its strong approach to cross party working and despite the changes in leadership, there was a continued focus on delivering the best for Colchester's communities – this is to be applauded.

The Council should look to further harness the strong pride in Colchester demonstrated by all the councillors we met. The Council should consult with members around the best systems to progress case work. This could include the development of partner directories for sign posting and or the development of a member case work portal for the Council. By developing a 'partnership directory' or 'partnership portal', detailing partners from a range of sectors, councillors would be able to directly signpost, avoiding duplication and ensuring communities get the best service possible. In addition, similar engagement with members should continue on matters related to S106 contributions.

The Chief Executive has also restructured her Senior Leadership Team with new Heads of Service appointed. In addition, there is a new interim Managing Director of Colchester Commercial Holdings and a new board chair of Colchester Borough Homes. Although early days, this feels like a strong leadership team that has a shared vision and drive for improvement.

The Council has developed and is due to launch a new vision, purpose and values and has taken a bottom-up approach to this, empowering staff to take this leadership role and work with managers to collaboratively develop these new approaches.

Ensuring all services areas are fully engaged, particularly those that work from alternative locations, such as Leisure Services and Waste and Recycling, will be a challenge, but the Peer Team recognise the positive work undertaken to date and encourage CCC to continue to improve staff engagement and embed the new structure to build on the opportunities provided by Rowan House and new ways of working.

With the sector facing significant challenges around recruitment and retention, it is important that CCC continues to develop its Employer Value Proposition. It has an excellent working space, strong approach to valuing and supporting staff, good training and development opportunities and benefits package – CCC can become an employer of choice.



Focus on city status.

CCC has fully embraced the opportunities that City status brings Colchester and has established a 'Board of Chairs' City Status Group created with external leads of key partnerships and the Leader of Council.

The approach is ambitious and is looking at 'Colchester City Centre over the next 100 years' and through extensive engagement the Council has delivered a Year of Celebration and is now looking at consultation on its City Centre Master Plan and vision and through maximising the opportunities that attendance on the Key Cities Group brings.

Get a firmer grip on the capital programme.


This is an area that you can clearly see is a priority for CCC and they have grasped the challenges ahead. Like many councils the current financial situation is a significant concern, but CCC are doing all they can to manage the situation including undertaking a comprehensive review of the Capital Programme with the report and recommendations informally agreed by Senior Leadership Board and Cabinet. The Council has put additional resources in place, with a new Programme Management Office and S106 capacity and finance capacity. The Council has introduced a more robust gateway process, review of all projects, removal of old and dormant projects and amended prioritisation tool.

To ensure full engagement CCC has also organised a member workshop to review the Northern Gateway Programme with another workshop session planned very soon.

The peer team recognises the challenges the Councils faces with its capital programme and stresses the importance of the new Section 151 Officer delivering his financial review within the agreed timescales. It is crucial that this information is delivered on time, and we suggest the Council sets a clear timeframe for its delivery of October 2023.

There is also a need to ensure there is a clear internal and external communications plan for the financial situation, to ensure staff, councillors and partners understand the true situation. Early messaging should be considered to lay the foundations for this.

Co-design a compelling and longer-term place-based narrative/city vision and strengthen the political and officer 'leaders of place' roles and look beyond Colchester.



Again, it was clear that significant progress has been made across these two areas. The new structure in place identifies a lead for key partnerships to reduce duplication including additional strategic capacity to support place-based health system work.

The New broader partnership involvement in groups such as the key cities group, shared services, Team Colchester and City Regeneration Partnership demonstrate this.

The Council was a lead partner in the review and reset of the North Essex Health Alliance which has been recognised by the Kings Fund and District Councils Network on the role of district councils in driving better health outcomes through Integrated Care Systems.

Also, the Leader of the Council was invited to attend an audience with King Charles at the request of the British Ambassador in Paris and the Mayor and other City figures have represented CCC widely in Europe through twinning events.

The relationship with Essex County Council will require continuing leadership from both parties, as shown by joint work on regeneration. Work on Public Health was seen as positive, and the sharing of the City Council's Rowan House HQ will help. But working with Highways was less so.

Overall CCC should look to strengthen engagement with partners at an operational level as well as ensuring it is as bold and ambitious as it can be with its plans for the City.

Strongly consider changing the election cycle.


This area has been considered by Full Council on 22 February 2023. An all-party working group was created to consider the issue which identified a key consideration is the forthcoming electoral review of the city.

Full Council therefore resolved that consideration of changing the Council's electoral cycle be deferred until the forthcoming electoral review of Colchester by the Local Government Boundary Commission has been completed and implemented in 2026.

Commission an independent review of Colchester Commercial (Holdings) Ltd, and its subsidiaries, also undertake an internal review of Colchester Borough Homes.

CCC has gripped this recommendation and undertaken a comprehensive risk assessment and full review of Colchester Commercial (Holdings) and subsidiary companies.

A new Interim Managing Director has been appointed for CCHL and a new Shareholder officer Team established to develop an action plan in response to review



recommendations. In addition, the Housing Quality Network completed a review of Colchester Borough Homes and an action plan created, with a new board Chair appointed.

The Council has also established a councillor group to oversee delivery of action plans for CCHL and CBH.

This work has been completed at pace and significant progress has been made, the LGA see this work as notable practice.

Summary and next steps

It is clear to the peer team that in terms of the recommendations made in 2022, a comprehensive response has been seen. Significant progress has been made across all recommendations.

The LGA continues to work alongside Colchester City Council to support its improvement through the LGA's Principal Adviser Rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk and via the LGAs Programme Manager, Gary.hughes@local.gov.uk.

CCC also invited the peer team to revisit Colchester in another year, as they valued the feedback and challenge, although this is outside the standard Corporate Peer Challenge approach, I am sure the peers would do all they can to continue to support Colchester.

For any questions about the Corporate Peer Challenge or Progress Review please contact

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