

Dorset Council 2022

Progress review and reflections on impact of sector led improvement

29th September 2022





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1. Introduction

Dorset Council may be only three years old, but it is not a fledgling local authority. Like all councils it has had to manage the challenges of the pandemic and is currently addressing the cost-of-living crisis. Through such experiences and many more besides, the LGA peer team that revisited the council in September 2022 were clear that Dorset Council is resolute in how it meets, tackles, and learns from such challenges; in essence this 3-year-old council both embraces and demonstrates the attributes of a Learning Organisation¹.

This summary report provides reflections from peers who have engaged with the council in the first 3 years of its lifespan. It does this by providing a brief overview of the peer engagement and approach, by summarising how Dorset Council has used such interventions to drive improvement and then outlines the findings from the team's visit of 29th September so that, true to form, the council can utilise the learning from that engagement.

2. Dorset Council and Sector Led Improvement

The predecessor councils that eventually formed the new Dorset Council in 2019 had all actively engaged in peer support and sector led improvement. This meant that Dorset Council was already welcoming of the LGA's offer to the sector [What is sector-led improvement? | Local Government Association](#) when the council was formed. At its heart are some key principles, including council's being responsible for their own performance, that the sector as a collective will take responsibility for its performance and that the LGA's role is to provide tools and support to underpin this. Therefore, it was no surprise that the council asked the LGA to deliver a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) relatively early in its lifespan [Corporate Peer Challenge | Local Government Association](#). The CPC goes to the very root of what makes for a good council by reviewing and providing a peer perspective on the council's: Local priorities and outcomes, Organisational and place leadership, Governance and culture, Financial planning and management and Capacity for improvement. Having

¹ [Building a Learning Organization \(hbr.org\)](#)

stood up the new council in Spring 2019 it might have seemed reasonable to undertake such an exercise within 12-18 months. Typical of what we know about Dorset Council, the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive commissioned the peer challenge to take place within 6 months, right in the middle of their appointment process to their middle manager groups. As the Chief Executive said at the time to the peer team, 'Let's go now, go early, go deep, and get the feedback that will help us shape the future'.

The above is reflective of the way Dorset Council has engaged with sector led improvement. Several of the council's senior officers and members are LGA peers [Become a peer | Local Government Association](#) and as such they not only welcome challenge themselves but challenge other councils too. As one of their senior officer team told the peers 'We learn from the experience of others all the time and we bring that back to Dorset; this accelerates our own learning and improvement'.

In the course of the last 3 years, as well as the Corporate Peer Challenge, the council has welcomed LGA led peer teams to give feedback, challenge and encouragement in respect of finance [Finance Peer Review and financial peer support | Local Government Association](#), planning [Planning Peer Review | Local Government Association](#) and cyber security [The LGA Cyber 360 | Local Government Association](#), and a Recovery and Reset Panel, which also took place during the Covid pandemic. This isn't the sum of the LGA support; the council has embraced much more besides including the LGA's Leadership offers - especially in respect of the political training and development, and of course the council has welcomed challenge and support from other partners involved in the Local Government and Public Sector improvement field. As such, there is a whole body of evidence available in respect of Dorset Council being an organisation that welcomes challenge, embraces it, acts upon it, and then evidences it by delivering improved outcomes.

3. Summary of the approach

In September 2022 the council welcomed back a LGA peer team, made up of peers who were involved in the CPC, the finance peer challenge and the planning challenge. Our intention was, 3 years on from the council forming, to provide some

overview of progress, from peers who have provided support but importantly challenge to Dorset Council, in respect of its improvement journey.

The peers involved in the one-day progress review at Dorset Council in September 2022 were:

- Gavin Jones - Chief Executive, Essex County Council (and Commissioner at Slough and Thurrock Councils)
- Cllr Rachel Bailey – Former Leader, Cheshire East Council
- Brian Glasson – Service Director (Planning) South Gloucestershire Council
- Paul Clarke – Principal Advisor, Local Government Association
- Kathryn Trant – Advisor, Local Government Association
- Mark Wynn – Head of Finance, Cheshire West and Chester Council (provided input prior to the review)

Prior to the progress review itself, all the peers had telephone or video calls with their key counterparts in Dorset, utilising the action plans produced by the council following the respective peer challenges (links to peer challenge reports and action plans – see appendix 1). They then took the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon the improvements that have been made, these were then tested out during the one-day progress review.

On the day of the progress review the peer team met in the morning with a range of stakeholders in four different focus groups. They included non-executive members at the council, a small number of representatives from Dorset’s Parish and Town Councils, some of the council’s front-line staff and managers, as well as a workshop for middle managers too. The workshops explored a whole range of views and issues in respect of the council’s progress, with an emphasis on how clear the council is about its priorities, how well understood the priorities are by stakeholders, what is the level of engagement and importantly how well are they being delivered.

Subsequently, the peer team reflected upon the outcome from these workshops, the information and reading the council had provided them in advance, as well as the pre-engagement the peers had with council stakeholders as already referenced.

The peer team then presented their summary findings in the afternoon at a ‘roundtable’ discussion with the Leader, Deputy Leader, members of the council’s cabinet, the Chief Executive, executive directors, and corporate directors, engaging

them in nearly a two-hour conversation. The round table was discussive with issues explored in a very positive and engaging nature – we expected no less from Dorset Council's 'Top Team'.

In total during the course of the day the peer team met with 55 stakeholders.

The LGA would like to thank Dorset Council for welcoming this progress review and for their commitment to sector led improvement.

4. Peer Challenge and Progress Review - Feedback

As highlighted Dorset Council has welcomed peer engagement and challenge throughout its existence. This next section provides a reflection on the feedback and discussions from the 'roundtable' but is prefaced with a summary of the key findings and progress from three of the council's peer challenges and specifically ones which the peer team for the progress review were members of: Corporate, Planning and Finance.

4.1 Peer Challenges

The council has fully embraced all of its peer challenges. Throughout all of them, Dorset's preparation for, engagement with, and learning from these interventions has been very positive. The speedy publication of reports and the development of robust action plans to address the recommendations from the reports, are evidence of this. Likewise, what has also been evident is that the council has regularly reviewed its progress against these action plans and welcomed engagement and support from the LGA's regional team.

Corporate Peer Challenge - October 2019

- Key messages from this early engagement were how important it was that the council achieved its 'safe and legal council' mantra from day one. This is easily said but not easily delivered and right from the outset the council quite rightly took confidence that it provided a strong continuity of services to its residents and has built upon that. In short Dorset Council made a great start.

- Also highlighted in the peer challenge report then were the clear signs of an emerging ‘can do’ culture, which three years on is now shining through - witness to this is the way the council has made significant change and improvement in key areas, for example, its performance in children’s services. Indeed, for our recent engagement with some staff in children’s services, we thought that they seemed very clear in respect of how council priorities linked well with their service priorities.
- The council actively sought from the start to deliver a ‘member led, governance light’ approach and our recommendation in respect of this at the time was to ‘Secure a shared understanding and commitment to agreed structures and frameworks’. We know this was taken forward in the council’s subsequent governance review, as evidenced in the council’s action plan. It is clear that there remains real strength in the proactive way the council keeps this under regular review. This is important, since there remains an underlying feeling, amongst some members we spoke with then and now, that the effectiveness of certain aspects of governance, notably scrutiny is not as strong as it could be. We know the council is in the midst of addressing that through a bespoke Scrutiny Peer Review in the Autumn.
- The council has clearly made significant progress with its leadership of place agenda and its strong and effective performance and engagement with key partners during the pandemic was evidence of that (highlighted during its remote peer challenge on recovery). Yet from this engagement and highlighted further in the feedback below, it does feel there is further work to be done with parishes and towns to fundamentally develop a strong and sustainable partnership plan, (albeit we met with a limited number of stakeholders). The forthcoming charter, once developed and enacted, will be a useful step along the way.
- The ‘One Council’ message we heard about in 2019 shines through still in 2022. The council staff are aware of some of the legacy issues and challenges, but they are both the council’s strongest advocates in promoting a ‘One Council’ approach, but also, because they care so passionately, also the strongest self-critics in identifying the barriers that exist to achieving this. The opportunity presented by the refreshing of the corporate plan offers a good platform to help staff, to help the council, in addressing this.

Planning Peer Challenge – November 2019 and January 2022

- At the time of this review, Dorset Council was fully engaged in the challenge of continuing to provide a customer-responsive planning service, whilst introducing a single software platform to replace six different systems, and also complete and embed new team structure, and planning committee arrangements. Three years on, we heard, partly as an unexpected benefit of COVID, that impressive progress had been made in delivering the single operating system, and the conscious decision to break with the past in creating new team and committee structures had been vindicated in terms of performance and consistency of user experience.
- A number of the Review recommendations focussed on the need to ensure the council's new vision and culture, (clearly articulated at that time by the senior managers), found its way through in a meaningful way to all levels of the organisation. It is clear from our re-visit that sustained progress has been made in establishing this Golden Thread and 'One Council' approach, for which the council is to be commended
- A clear commitment from the council, given at the time of the review, was to make rapid progress on a new Local Plan to cover the whole Dorset Council area replacing the partial and out-of-date plan coverage inherited from the predecessor authorities. Three years on we were told that progress has been made in convergence and transformation, with work underway in reviewing and reframing of the Local Plan, and in particular its approach to accommodating housing growth. The peer team would naturally encourage the council to keep focussed on progressing this, so that the delivery of the plan is achieved in a timely manner. Indeed, since our most recent return visit to the council in September we have heard that the council Leader and Portfolio Holder are in positive dialogue with Government and hope this will help with the council ambition to achieve a revised Local Plan in accordance with the revised Local Plan Schedule agreed by Cabinet in October 2022. In addition, the peer team consider that the council should seek to ensure that a balanced portfolio of sites for housing, both in scale, and location, is developed to ensure needs across the Dorset Council area are fully met and to better safeguard annual supply across the whole plan period.

Finance Peer Challenge – June and July 2021

Dorset Council welcomed the Finance Peer Challenge at a time of some volatility in the council's financial forecasts. Similar to many councils and public sector bodies, Dorset Council was understandably struggling to predict the impact of the pandemic on services, as well as affirm initial budget estimates for the new council.

The peer team saw how the council's leadership had invested significant effort to foster that One Council culture, which was evolving to provide a solid foundation for the challenges the council was facing and was rooted in the council's ambitions to deliver for its residents and community.

Dorset Council had realised savings as a result of convergence and the pooling of budgets, however there were considerable overspends in some budget areas and non-delivery of some of the savings. Senior leaders understood that the council needed to take rapid mitigating actions to ensure dependency on reserves did not become the norm. A number of recommendations of the peer team related to more closely linking the budget setting process, including growth and savings plans, to the council's Corporate Plan and Finance Strategy and to improve accountability for delivering those plans by embedding ownership of the budget challenge within services. Further recommendations related to exploring opportunities for further convergence and efficiency savings and to clarify ambitions around the 'commercial' agenda.

In March 2022, members of the peer team reviewed the council's progress against the action plan arising from the Finance peer challenge and found that following diligent and focussed work by both members and officers, a new approach to budget setting had resulted in the council being more confident in the robustness of the budget for 2022/23. Identification of savings had been promoted as a positive process to instil a sense of working together and transformation savings targets had been refreshed by putting rigour into the process. Ownership of budgets was reflected in cabinet members being proactive and positive, discussions on finance were ongoing.

On returning to the council for this review, the team found that the council, unsurprisingly in the current context, had an inflation challenge, and there was some nervousness that a number of the biggest challenges such as inflation, Adult social care reforms and pay inflation were not all within their control.

Both Children's services and Adults services were developing longer term plans to address their challenges, for example the setting up of Care Dorset to deal with a shortfall in the care market in Dorset. The commercial strategy was still being developed.

Given the scale of the challenge the Council (like many others) is facing, it is important they maintain a strong focus on some of the promised transformation and convergence savings from LGR that may still be available.

4.2 Findings from 29 September Progress Review

The peer team were delighted to revisit Dorset Council. As we would have expected, the stakeholders we spoke with during the morning focus groups as well as the afternoon round table discussions, gave their views without fear or favour. It was frequently positive, and sometimes challenging, but constructively so, and all channelled towards helping the council improve. We have identified below some of the key topics, themes, and peer reflections.

We spent some time in the workshops and round table discussing the notion of a 'One Council' theme, which we knew Dorset Council were keen to promote right from 2019. We were very pleased to see that this theme had landed and all staff we spoke with were absolutely bought into this. This doesn't come without challenges and there still remain some LGR legacy issues but the sense that, as one staff member told us, 'We are all in this together' shone through. This was in 2019 a developing organisational strength and remains so – people feel empowered and positive.

The above point is particularly important as it gives the council such a strong foundation to build upon. Staff are bought into the culture and ethos of Dorset Council. Staff are among the council's best critics too, as they eloquently outlined the barriers to some of this, for example, IT, working to some extent in silos, lack of opportunity to fully embrace change, failure to scale up good local solutions corporately (it shouldn't all be top down we were told) etc. However, they were critical only from a sense that they wanted the council to continue to improve and saw a key role for themselves in that improvement plan and journey. The strength of this should not be underestimated - staff seemed very relaxed to talk about their thoughts, which pointed towards a "safe" culture across the organisation.

It is clear that all stakeholders we spoke to recognise it will take time to fully embed this One Council approach, but importantly it is something they all want and that is key – the peer team suggested the council may want to look at the way Essex is grappling with and trying to tackle this – challenging their service model, looking how they coalesce from a place, people, and corporate perspective and creating space for challenging conversations. It did feel to the peer team that this approach seemed more apparent in Dorset, in for example children’s services and it may be worthwhile for the council to take an ‘appreciative enquiry’ approach, exploring how and why such understandings seemed more embedded in certain parts of the organisation.

That space and time to fully engage with staff will be important as Dorset develops its council plan – that will be a good thing to do now as it plans ahead and for its next iteration and future. However, it is clear there is more to do to embed the priorities and commitments that have been highlighted and to some extent discussed with staff. This is likely to be needed with external stakeholders too. In essence, we heard about a lack of clarity in general terms, and specifically in respect of the status of the leadership commitments. To the peer team this sounded as if there was a need to look afresh at the engagement, understanding, and purpose of this. We spoke at the round table about the ‘Golden Thread’ that comes from the council’s top priorities being needed to be reflected right into team and individual objectives and it was with this challenge in mind and whether that is currently there yet, that we suggest the council reflect upon this.

Building upon the above points the peer team heard from some stakeholders that there were perhaps too many priorities and not sufficient de-prioritisation. The peer teams reflections were that during the last three years the council, its staff and members have undergone a lot of ‘change load’, and as it matures now as an organisation it will be important that it absolutely balances this sense of priorities. This is also important given the challenging financial issues all councils have faced – Dorset Council have, as shown through the finance peer challenge, made real progress in ensuring their financial security and sustainability, but keeping a granular focus on linking priorities to financial commitments needs to remain front and centre. Engaging and communicating this well with staff through the months ahead will also be very important. Some related feedback in respect of this related to new staff joining during the pandemic, where we heard mixed views about the effectiveness of

induction and how people were received into the council. As with the comments in relation to children's services earlier, it would be useful for the council to explore where this was achieved more successfully in certain parts of the council and learn lessons for the future.

In terms of changes three years on, the peer team reflected that real progress had been made in several key areas of performance. For example the improvements in children's services are well documented, but one shouldn't underestimate the challenges and changes that have taken place in that service and how the senior officer team has lived and breathed the culture of the 'Learning Organisation' description referenced earlier in this report. The same is true though in several areas and the influence of the senior officer team in corporately leading by example is a good rudder in steering Dorset Council purposefully.

Having positively referenced service improvement above and with the knowledge that the council embraces tools such as LGINFORM [Home | LG Inform \(local.gov.uk\)](https://www.local.gov.uk), it did strike the peer team that there are opportunities for the council to build upon as it matures as a council. Clarifying the communication and engagement in respect of the corporate plan, priorities and mission statements may well enable the council to also look afresh at how it can, into the future, more effectively report against these outcomes, both internally and most importantly for the residents of Dorset – so now is an ideal time to look afresh at the councils 'corporate dashboard'.

The peer team acknowledge that the engagement with external stakeholders was understandably limited in this 'snapshot' progress review, but we did speak in depth with a small group of parish and town representatives. Once more we heard about a willingness to engage between Dorset Council and its parish and town councils, and we also heard about some good examples of collaboration – especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. However, we also heard that Dorset Council had a disposition to take the key issues away and look to solve the issues on behalf of, not necessarily with, partners. The feeling was that contributions from external partners were not necessarily being sought or encouraged. The expertise or willingness of the parish and town councils to support, share, or even take over, the delivery of local services did not feel truly welcomed. One example of this we were told about was in respect of climate change, and other apparent opportunities related to local car parks and toilet facilities. The view that stakeholders have on these things is naturally coloured by the

lens through which the issue is viewed, but the overriding sense we had, was that the concept of 'co-production' needed a turbo charge, so that everyone can work together on a common purpose and to collectively make progress. The work being undertaken on the Parish and Town Charter provides a useful vehicle to work on this.

What is clear from our discussions was that all Dorset members see themselves as having a key role in improving these relationships with communities, parishes and towns. This message shone through from both the non-executive members we spoke with, but also with the cabinet members too. This is to be applauded and will make a useful 'deep dive' for a future corporate peer challenge to test the foundation, substance and outcomes from what is eventually agreed upon.

Continuing in the vein above, the meeting with non-executive members was very engaging and purposeful – they understandably had their frustrations and concerns, but once more they want to help positively influence the council, so that Dorset's communities prosper - that shone through. The lead member role we heard about during the session is clearly taking hold and will be a positive development route for members as they 'grow' into their roles and extend their areas of responsibility. We met with members from across all political groups and they all saw the role of the ward and community member as a key linchpin in driving improvement in their places and their council. They are looking for ways to enhance that ambition and perhaps looking afresh at 'the member role' in the light of the refresh of the corporate plan, in terms of their convenor role and concept of co-production with parishes and towns, and finally as the council reviews its scrutiny arrangements are all examples that can be grasped.

5. Final thoughts

Dorset Council is at the forefront when it comes to improvement - it is in the DNA of everything the council does and shines through from its staff group right up to its senior officers and members. The council has clearly used the opportunities of the various sector led engagements it has had, most especially its peer challenges, and has embraced the recommendations the peer teams left them with.

What shone through was the desire to build upon the great start that the council has made, to forge that 'One Council' approach, to drive improvement and change through the development of a new corporate plan and to keep on improving the way that services are delivered and the outcomes they achieve, albeit in times of unprecedented financial challenges.

This autumn, given the financial landscape will be challenging for all councils, Dorset Council has achieved much in its three years to put itself in a strong as possible financial position. Therefore: refreshing the corporate plan; engaging staff more effectively especially in the process of this; utilising the ownership they had of that 'One Council' approach; being crystal clear about priorities and capacity to deliver them - will all be key. If the collective benefits of working through the above can then be translated into a clear and compelling overarching narrative which helps all Dorset Council stakeholders chart a course ahead into the medium term, then this will be a very good outcome.

As the round table discussions concluded the peer team reminded Dorset colleagues of a phrase an earlier peer team used in the September 2020 Recovery and Renewal Panel, convened during the pandemic. It was 'The organisation's political and managerial leadership demonstrates a strong desire to learn, reflect and review in order to inform future action and direction'. That was true then and it was also true in September 2022 – it is the way Dorset Council is, a Learning Organisation.

6. Next Steps

The LGA would like to thank Dorset Council for undertaking this three years on LGA progress review, and for the peers who took part. We would encourage the council to share the findings of this progress review; it is a testament to the fact that the council embraces challenge and sector led improvement.

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.

Paul Clarke, LGA Principal Advisor paul.clarke@local.gov.uk is the council's main point of contact with the LGA and would be happy to discuss further support to the council, following this progress review.

Appendix 1

Links to relevant peer challenge reports

[Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report October 2019](#)

[Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan January 2020](#)

[Planning Service Peer Challenge Feedback Report September 2020](#)

[Planning Service Review Findings and Action Plan December 2020](#)

[Finance Peer Challenge Feedback Report and Action Plan July 2021](#)