

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Southwark Council

2 May 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



Contents

- 1. Introduction 3
- 2. Summary of the approach..... 3
- 3. Progress Review - Feedback..... 4
- 4. Final thoughts and next steps 10

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during October 2023 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 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 Southwark 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 Southwark Council took place (onsite) on 2 May 2025.

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

- Strategic direction of the council
- Service improvements
- Future Southwark capacity and corporate infrastructure

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

- Cllr Bev Craig, Leader, Manchester City Council
- Judith Hurcombe, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

And they were joined by Becky Shaw, Chief Executive, East Sussex County Council.

3. Progress review - feedback

Out of the CPC's eleven recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that all have been progressed.

Clear improvement can be seen overall across the range of issues raised by the peer team in October 2023. The council shows a good level of self-awareness about the progress it has made, the challenges it faces, as well as expressing ambitions for the place and for residents. Members and officers at all levels continue to express a genuine passion for doing the best for Southwark's residents, with positivity, energy and ambition. Staff told us they can see improvements over the past eighteen months in communications and how they find out what the council is doing across its services, and they also like the staff Expo recognition scheme, launched in January 2024 with a second event planned for June 2025.

3.1. Strategic direction of the council

The Southwark 2030 strategy was launched in February 2025 and a one-year delivery plan was agreed at Cabinet that month. It has been co-produced with a wide range of residents, businesses and stakeholders from across the borough. It is based on three core principles of empowering people: investing in prevention and reducing inequality. The vision has six broad goals of a good start in life; a safer Southwark; a strong and fair economy; staying well; a healthy environment; and decent homes for all.

Although huge amounts of effort have been involved in getting to this stage, there is more to do in getting staff buy in to the overall vision and understand what it means in practice. Those members of staff engaged in the progress review generally bought into the high level aims of the vision and welcome it, but they are less clear of their and their colleagues' roles in its delivery. Making an overt link to the delivery plan work and the performance management of staff may help improve this understanding. Consideration too of some "quick wins" may help everyone (members, staff, residents and partners) also consolidate their understanding of both how they can contribute, expected pace and also see the strategy being delivered

and having an impact.

During summer 2024 the council undertook its first resident insight survey, benchmarked against the London Councils and LGA approaches. This showed very high levels of satisfaction with the way the council runs services and a very high score of 88 per cent residents' satisfaction with their local areas. Residents also flagged concerns about crime, particularly after dark safety; housing; and involvement in local decision making. This may provide an opportunity to focus some of the short-term partnership work in Southwark 2030 and cross council working. Residents' concerns as well as the council's own analysis on its performance have led to a fundamental review of its community safety services. The results of the externally commissioned review were not complete at the time of this CPC progress review and will report to Cabinet in due course.

3.2. Service improvements

Southwark has the largest social housing stock of any London borough and has significant and documented challenges facing some of that stock, as well as concerns from residents. The Regulator of Social Housing issued a C3 judgement in November 2024 which stated there are serious failings in how the council is meeting its customer outcomes and significant improvement is needed.

The council has responded by identifying six priorities for housing underpinned by a £250m investment programme, to improve the overall safety, condition and sustainability of its stock. This includes a new repairs operating model using digital tools to achieve better diagnostics and scheduling of repairs; the creation of a new damp and mould teams to tackle new and existing cases; more training for staff; and a stronger voice for tenants including a new resident engagement strategy to be launched in summer 2025. Consideration is being given to how to improve the long-term sustainability of the housing revenue account (HRA).

It is clear that housing is currently the council's top priority, and this is understandable given councillors' staff, partners and residents' concerns. However, there are a couple of areas to watch:

- Everyone wants housing to improve and be as good as it can be. Some staff

however voice concerns that the improvement currently being planned for or underway may not be sustainable or understood.

- Some members of staff outside of housing have concerns about the rest of the services delivered by Southwark and a feeling that they are not as important, and some members of staff feel their work isn't a current priority. This is perhaps inevitable when a council service is known to be failing, but these views suggest that ongoing reassurance is needed for people working in services not delivering housing improvement. The council wide delivery plan will potentially help set housing's priority in context, including what the focus will be once housing begins to improve.

Whilst housing is in the spotlight it will also be important to get the balance right between offering reassurance for members of staff that they can raise issues of concern, as well as supporting them to improve the service for tenants. Members too will need ongoing assurance and reassurance that their concerns are being responded to and paying attention to members' casework data and the intelligence they gather will also help to drive improvement.

Much more focus has been brought on complaints at all stages, including a new wide-ranging process across all services, as well as a recovery programme to tackle high volumes of stage 2 complaints. As might be expected, some of this focus has been on housing complaints through the creation of a dedicated team, as well as bringing together officers working on complaints from across the council. The council reflects that this has been successful in driving service improvement across the organisation and achieving earlier resolution to issues, including halving the number of upheld complaints being presented.

Monthly reporting at the council-wide corporate level and to councillors has been introduced, with the aim of bringing an organisation-wide view of performance. This is an important lever to provide council wide context and focus as well as drive pace and confidence.

In the October 2023 CPC members expressed some concerns about the responsiveness to their casework enquiries, which has since been reviewed. However, there is variable data across services on how members' casework is

answered, for example the January 2025 report showed variable responses across services ranging from 46-97 per cent of enquiries met within the agreed timescale.

Effort and attention have been targeted at improving customers' experiences, building on the use of data and intelligence. Taking this further the council has been working with Thinks Insight & Strategy to further develop its strategy, which will be discussed at cabinet in summer 2025.

The technology and digital strategy 2024-2026 was launched in April 2024, with the overarching ambition of making Southwark one of the best digitally connected boroughs, and every resident having access to a fast and stable internet connection. Artificial intelligence is being piloted, particularly in social work, to reduce bureaucracy and efficiency for staff working with customers. The new strategy overall has tremendous potential to deliver a more effective and efficient council, reducing bureaucracy and enabling better outcomes for residents. A next step should be to provide clarity about how this strategy will be delivered, through a clear action and investment plan which links to the council's wider transformation strategy and delivery, and a clearly defined future operating model for the organisation.

3.3. Future Southwark capacity and corporate infrastructure

Future Southwark was launched in March 2024. Its first phase has included a range of workstreams which have included the development of the people plan, enhancing support for councillors, and reviewing corporate resources and infrastructure. The second phase of the programme will continue to strengthen the corporate centre to improve cross council working is key as it includes work to support the delivery of Southwark 2030, and introducing more transformation to support the council's financial sustainability.

By 2026/27 the council plans to deliver around £10m of transformation savings and tackle a budget gap of £2.5m for each of the next two years. The corporate transformation and efficiency board is leading on delivery of these savings, and there is a reasonable degree of confidence inside the organisation that these savings will be delivered as planned. It needs to be developed across the council so that all options are explored and the reasons for eventual decisions well understood.

The original CPC referenced the need to develop corporate working and support. Over the past 18 months the council has been growing its corporate centre and people speak more confidently about how they work together across services, and staff recognise a stronger corporate ethos and that the council is changing, including how it reports about its performance. We heard mixed responses from staff about the existence of silo working, with some recognising it and others feeling it was an inaccurate portrayal in both 2023 and now. Similarly, there are mixed views about whether the pace of council working is too slow or about right.

Further investment in corporate communications has been made, and a public affairs and engagement strategy has been agreed. The council's profile is growing externally, for example through stimulating a national debate on the future of council housing in England.

A number of areas were recognised by staff as improvements including the range of information being sent out through corporate channels, including frequent email updates. The all-staff events led by the chief executive are well attended and her blog was widely referenced by staff as a positive development, with high numbers of staff getting involved. Overall staff feel that the council is getting better at communicating what Southwark is about. There are some concerns about inconsistencies of how and from whom people receive messages, and these could be addressed by thinking about internal communication in a more systematic way as well as ensuring that there is sufficient capacity and investment in staff communication.

The people plan is the council's workforce development strategy and is about to be finalised. It has been developed following widespread engagement with over 700 staff, and the employee survey results from 2023 onwards. Once it is agreed the people plan will be a core building block for the future, which should help the organisation to deliver the vision 2030. It has a particular role in helping people to understand their roles, performance targets and the practical elements of people power, as well as articulating the values and behaviours the organisation expects everyone to work to. Having a robust, consistent and comprehensive appraisal scheme in place will be important.

The council knows it needs to keep working on and investing in its corporate infrastructure and focus to ensure all parts of the council work effectively together and are learning from each other in a systematic and consistent way. Members and officers know there is more to do across services, particularly in housing, to achieve the council's full potential.

A new digital and technology strategy was finalised in April 2025, backed by investment, and work is ongoing to create a new corporate hub for digital services to aid insight and service delivery. Some participants in the progress review were enthusiastic about the potential of ICT and AI tools to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services, although some also felt that further investment may be needed. There are also concerns about whether casework management software in some services has had sufficient investment in order to deliver for the future. There were mixed views too about whether the council is becoming more data and intelligence led, or whether just the profile of both have increased.

Since the original CPC in October 2023 Southwark can evidence that it has responded well to the recommendations, and has reviewed, consolidated and strengthened its corporate working. The peer team heard suggestions for ongoing improvement, and at both the individual and collective level there is a clear ambition to deliver more and with better outcomes.

Other things the council might want to consider at this stage are:

- Continuing with the strengthening of corporate working, performance reporting, systems and processes which bring rigour and clarity across the organisation.
- The development of a clear set of performance targets across the council which are seen to be monitored regularly will help underpin the work and clarify what good looks like. Once the delivery plan for Southwark 2030 is finalised achieving some quick wins will help people to see action on the ground. Officers could be more proactive in developing projects and proposals which would show members and residents that their input is leading to visible change.
- Explore the learning from and build on the success of the people powered

innovation fund, which empowers staff, has impact with residents, and is widely recognised as a positive move.

- Explore how pace and learning across teams and the wider organisation can be improved
- Consider how other councils in and beyond London deliver good practice and innovation and how to bring this in to Southwark
- Keep on investing and improving in internal communications to build on successes to date.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Southwark 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.

Mona Sehgal (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk