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LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Morecambe Town Council

28 February 2024

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in March 2023, which was delivered in conjunction with NALC (National Association of Local Councils). Following this, the council published the full report with a high-level action plan based on the recommendations made.

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

- Update peers on the progress made and receive feedback on this, including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations.
- Discuss with peers, reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site'.
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA and NALC would like to thank Morecambe Town Council for their commitment to sector led improvement.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Morecambe Town Council took place on 28 February 2024.

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

- Theme 1 – Organisational Vision and Workforce
- Theme 2 – Communications and Engagement
- Theme 3 – Partnership Working
- Theme 4 – Governance and Culture

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

- Mark Williams, Town Clerk at Falmouth Town Council

- Cllr Sara Butler, Frome Town Council
- Anders Hanson, Member Services Manager – National Association of Local Councils
- Rachel Robinson, CPC Manager – Local Government Association
- David Pye, Shadow CPC Manager - Local Government Association

The peer team met face to face in Morecambe Town Council (with Cllr Sara Butler participating virtually) over the course of one day with a number of representatives from the council.

The timetable of activity involved the following:

- Gathering information and views from nine meetings (including focus group meetings).
- Review of the council's CPC high level action plan and a short position statement – both of these documents outline the council's assessment of progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, peers have done so as fellow local government officers and councillors.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Since the CPC was undertaken in March 2023, Morecambe Town Council has experienced significant changes to its political leadership. This followed the May 2023 elections that saw 6 of the 26 councillors retaining their seats, and the appointment of a new Chairperson. This change resulted in a pause in progressing the actions following the CPC recommendations, with the new administration spending time developing relationships, understanding their role and responsibilities, and revisiting the priorities of the council.

In this context, the Progress Review has provided an opportunity for the political leadership and senior officer to reflect on the progress made and consider suitable next steps regarding the on-going implementation of the CPC's recommendations.

An overview of progress against each of the recommendations arising from the CPC (as outlined in Appendix A) is shown below, grouped under the thematic headings noted above.

Theme 1 – Organisational Vision and Workforce (recommendations 2.2 and 2.3)

The original CPC recommended that Morecambe Town Council develop a clear, co-produced corporate mission statement with local stakeholders and partners, including Lancaster City Council and local community groups, which is underpinned by a new strategic plan, shared outcomes and an aligned longer-term budget profile. The peer team heard during the revisit that the council recognises the importance of refreshing its key priorities and ambitions and noted that there is still a lot of work required to clarify the council's identity, role and vision. To date the council has made limited progress with this recommendation but intends to do this when revisiting its Community Action Plan, with work scheduled to commence in September 2024. The logic being, to incorporate with this, the development of a three-year financial forecast and strategy.

Given the significance of this revised plan, the peer team would urge the council to bring forward the timescales for this. For example, a refreshed Community Action Plan is an essential component for enabling the future strategic discussions the council seeks with its upper tier authorities (Lancaster City Council and Lancashire County Council). Having a clearer vision, identity and set of priorities in place will support the development of joint priorities and shared ambitions for Morecambe, with opportunities for convergence being explored where appropriate.

At the original CPC, the peer team recommended that the staffing structure of the council should be reviewed to ensure it meets the current needs and future ambitions of the council. In response to this, the council reported that it had undertaken a full staffing review since the CPC, with the establishment increasing to 9.5 full time equivalents (FTE) from 6 FTE. This has included recruitment to the roles of Communications Officer, Administrative Officer and Finance Officer, supported by a more appropriate employee package that attracted a high-quality pool of candidates. At the time of the progress review, two positions (Events Officer and Open Spaces Manager) were still to be filled. This new staffing team will be better resourced to

meet the current work of the council, although the peer team heard that there is still much dependence on the Town Clerk to enable the delivery of some operational functions, such as the administration of democratic services (for example, the compilation of legally compliant agendas). This over-reliance is something that still needs to be addressed, along with consideration of succession planning. Moving forward there will also need to be a review of the staffing establishment to ensure alignment with the priorities in the refreshed Community Action Plan.

To address capacity pressures, time-limited work, such as staging events and festivals, could be commissioned out to specialist agencies, or individuals as appropriate and when representing best value. This approach, whilst meeting the need identified by the council, represents a fit-for-purpose approach that would be flexible and responsive to that need. The establishment of councillor champion roles was also proposed by peers as something that could be explored to respond to capacity issues, along with a review of existing delegations.

The peer team also suggest that a review of the roles and responsibilities of officers and members is undertaken. For example, exploring fundamentals, such as how councillors set the strategic direction of the council and the practical role of officers in the delivery of priorities. This will help to ensure members and officers have a common understanding of how they work together to best effect and maximise capacity. This will also help to reduce the current over reliance on the Town Clerk to enable change.

Theme 2 – Communications and Engagement (recommendation 2.5, 2.7 and 2.8)

In response to the recommendation that a communication strategy should be developed, which both increases and enhances the reach of internal and external communications, a Communications Officer was appointed and took up post in December 2023. This officer has been tasked with progressing the development of the communications strategy and early evidence of progress was seen, including:

- the building of relationships with communications officers in local partnership organisations including Morecambe BID, Marketing Lancashire and Lancaster City Council;

- the development of proposals for an annual report on the work of the council over the last 12 months;
- the creation of a brief for the replacement of the existing web site; and
- the review of the location and use of the council's notice boards that have been removed due to disrepair.

Peers stressed the importance of ensuring that the forthcoming communications strategy draws from and supports the delivery of the refreshed Community Action Plan. In this regard the council is producing an interim communications plan in the run up to the creation of the new Community Action Plan to bridge this gap.

The CPC included a recommendation for the council to consider developing a visible, branded, street level hub for residents to access information and signposting. Whilst the creation of a street-level hub for the council has not been taken forward to date due to the impact of the May elections, the peer team saw that there was enthusiasm amongst officers and members that they spoke with to identify a more central and visible location for the council, with further potential for this site becoming a community hub offering both council offices but also a community asset that can be used by local residents and groups.

Some discussions have also taken place regarding Lancaster City Council's decision to close Morecambe's Visitor Information Centre, and dialogue is ongoing to ascertain the feasibility of the Town Council supporting a similar service in the future.

The Communications Officer will play a key role in developing the brand for the council for which a specific budget has been identified during 2024/25. Peers were reminded that the public realm service is a key 'shop window' service of the council at present. Feedback from residents illustrates the positive impact that the service is having on resident wellbeing and pride in the place.

In reflecting on progress against the recommendation to instigate more targeted approaches to consulting with communities where there is greatest need, the council accepted that more focused offline approaches should be considered in the future, such as in-person events in community venues which will be employed when engaging the community to establish a vision for Morecambe's future. Peers heard that in the short-term, a resident questionnaire will be launched in July to inform the

development of the 2025/26 budget, accompanied by four budget briefings that will take place at Morecambe Town Hall aimed at gathering feedback from local people regarding what they would like the council to prioritise moving forward. These insights should in turn feed into the process to create the new Community Action Plan.

Theme 3 - Partnership Working (recommendations 2.1 and 2.4)

As recommended during the CPC, peers were informed that the new administration agree that they should be engaging more in place-shaping for Morecambe, working in collaboration with all tiers of local government and partners in this. Activity against this theme has been slow to move forward due to the impact of the May election at Morecambe Town Council. However, the team heard that (as noted above) a new Planning and Regeneration Committee has been formed, the primary responsibility of which is to oversee the council's role in influencing place leadership, working with other agencies to guide Morecambe Town Council's input into matters concerning the regeneration of Morecambe, including projects earmarked for key sites, such as the location previously used by Frontierland (a theme park).

The councillors that the peer team spoke with were vocal about the need for the council to have a seat at the table to influence local developments, such as the Eden Project (a proposed eco visitor attraction) and to co-design the creation of a wider vision for the town. The council welcomed their involvement in the High Streets Task Force project established by Lancaster City Council during 2023. However, the peer team believe that there is a need for Morecambe Town Council to be clear (and have a collective understanding) of what its voice and role is in this regard. The refresh of the council's strategic plan is therefore crucial in this context and should outline how the council supports a more proactive approach to working with key partners.

In a similar vein, peers heard that the council recognises the benefits of becoming further embedded in local partnerships and community groups to influence the delivery of shared outcomes, as recommended in the CPC. However, there was no evidence of progress in this regard beyond the work of the Communications Officer (as noted above) and the peer team did not receive any new information, or updates regarding the council's connections with partners, including voluntary and community

groups, at the most local level in Morecambe. Proactive engagement with these organisations is also a powerful mechanism in working together to achieve common outcomes for the residents of Morecambe and is a consideration which may inform the objectives in the forthcoming Community Action Plan. The peer team suggested that further development of the linkage between the town council and these groups would be beneficial.

Peers were told that the council's relationship with the district and county council had advanced over the past 12 months. Morecambe Town Council's delivery of the district-wide public realm weed control service on behalf of Lancashire County Council continues and peers heard that complaints in the service have reduced since the Town Council commenced delivery in April 2023. Members are keen to explore further opportunities for collaborative working and service delivery. However, as noted above, clarity regarding the Town Council's vision and priorities, through a refreshed Community Action Plan, will be essential to inform future strategic discussions with the upper tier authorities.

Theme 4 – Governance and Culture (recommendations 2.6, 2.9 and 2.10)

Peers were informed that the council continues to operate in line with the National Association of Local Councils and Society of Local Council Clerks, Civility and Respect Pledge, with councillors that the peer team spoke to stating that all members were committed to working together collaboratively for the good of Morecambe and were proud of progress that has been made in this regard.

During the peer challenge, the peer team were told that internal communication between officers and members is not as effective as it might be, with some members wanting to be in a position to more directly influence decision making. It was recommended that a more inclusive approach to internal governance was developed. The peer team heard that this has not progressed much since the CPC but will now be explored through the additional capacity afforded to the council through the appointment of the new officers (noted above). For example, due to a lack of resource, whilst financial information and monitoring updates have been received by Full Council, the Finance and Governance Committee has not met regularly in recent years. Draft dates have been scheduled for meetings during 2024 to ensure that

adequate oversight is maintained by councillors. Frequent internal audits of financial processes involving councillors have also been introduced to enhance transparency.

In line with the peer team's recommendation from the original CPC, the council highlighted that they will be employing a prudent approach when considering additional income generating opportunities, including applying for additional grant funding for projects and schemes. One of the key roles of the new Finance Officer is to advise the Council on potential funding opportunities and any financial risks with undertaking service delivery. Nevertheless, the public realm weeding contract delivered on behalf of Lancashire County Council has generated approximately £65K during 2023/24 and the peer team heard that some members are keen to explore additional opportunities for service delivery.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA and NALC would like to thank Morecambe Town 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.

NALC is able to discuss any further support that you may require by emailing anders.hanson@nalc.gov.uk . In addition, Falmouth Town Council have offered to maintain a dialogue as another mechanism for support.

Appendix A – CPC Recommendations (March 2023)

2.1 **In collaboration with partners, including Lancaster City Council and Lancashire County Council, play a key role in place shaping in Morecambe**

Undertake a key role in place shaping for Morecambe, particularly in regard to the Eden Project Morecambe, and co-create a strategic narrative for the town that involves all tiers of local government and partners.

2.2 **Develop a clear, co-produced corporate mission statement which will help the council to clearly define its purpose and aspiration for the local community**

Co-produce a corporate mission statement with relevant local stakeholders and partners, such as Lancaster City Council and local community groups, which is underpinned by a new strategic plan, shared outcomes and an aligned longer-term budgeting profile.

2.3 **Review the staffing structure to ensure it meets the current needs and future ambitions of the council**

This should include a focus on developing leadership capacity and ensuring that MTC has the capacity to deliver against the strategic plan.

2.4 **Create and become further embedded in local partnerships, involving for example Lancashire County Council, Lancaster City Council, Marketing Lancashire, Eden Project Morecambe, Morecambe BID and local community group networks, to influence the delivery of shared outcomes in line with the refreshed mission statement**

This could include exploring the feasibility of MTC adopting a role as a facilitative council, working with partners to enable the achievement of common outcomes.

2.5 **Establish a communications strategy**

Develop a communications strategy that increases and enhances the reach of internal and external communications, which should include a rapid review of

the web site.

2.6 Continue to implement codes of civility and respect

Following agreement to sign up to the local council sector's Civility and Respect Pledge, ensure that this commitment is implemented in full moving forward.

2.7 Consider developing a visible, branded, street level hub for residents to access information and signposting

In collaboration with partners, explore the feasibility of establishing a one-stop shop for Morecambe residents to access council services from one place.

2.8 Instigate more targeted approaches to consulting with communities where there is greatest need

Implement creative mechanisms to engage with hard-to-reach communities in ways that local residents can easily access, understand and feel involved.

2.9 Employ a prudent approach when considering taking on additional income generating, or locally-led service delivery opportunities – gradually building confidence and gaining credibility

This will be important to build further trust with all tiers of local government and associated partners.

2.10 Develop more inclusive approaches to internal governance

Ensure that all members feel involved in the running of Morecambe Town Council and have appropriate opportunity to scrutinise decision making.