

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Rushcliffe Borough Council

Wednesday 6 November 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge

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1. Introduction

Rushcliffe Borough Council (Rushcliffe) undertook a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during Monday 15 to Thursday 18 January 2024 and promptly published the full report and an action plan.

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

- receive peer team feedback on the council's early progress against the CPC main recommendations and the council's RAG (red, amber, green) rated action plan
- consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities, challenges and support needs that may have arisen since the peer team was onsite for the CPC
- discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank the council for its commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in this ongoing, open and close relationship the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

Rushcliffe's Progress Review took place onsite on Wednesday 6 November 2024. The review focussed on each of the CPC's main recommendations:

1. take a strategic/corporate approach to programme and project management, building on and aligning with your existing corporate performance management function
2. invest further in staff and councillor training; ensure councillors in particular take up mandatory, essential and other training, including that on councillor/officer roles, political awareness, code of conduct and other internal processes
3. create further time, space, resource and capacity with your strategic partners to identify what could be needed in future regarding changes in the landscape that affect you and your communities, notably the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) Development Corporation and Freeport

4. further develop and align your capital programme with your economic growth strategy once you have agreed the latter for 2024/25, with clear outcomes for both
5. use your respected position with all your partners to deliver further defined outcomes across the whole council
6. explore options through your climate change action plan to maximise delivery of environmental outcomes across your strategic development and growth sites
7. integrate climate change ambitions in all your service areas
8. reduce the number of RBC values, eg to a maximum of five, working with your employee liaison group and trade unions
9. build up your future, annual or mid-term, light-touch corporate strategy refreshes from community level to best understand and respond to your communities' needs and aspirations for the future.

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

- Member Peer - Peter Fleming OBE, former Leader, Sevenoaks District Council
- Chief Executive Peer – Scott Logan, former Chief Executive, Basildon Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Vicki Goddard
- LGA Project Support Officer – Suraiya Khatun (offsite).

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Of the CPC's main recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are completed/progressed.

Overall comments

Rushcliffe has experienced and responded to much local change since its last CPC. This includes: elections of a new Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe and EMCCA's first Mayor (both of whom the council is building further relationships with), further establishment of EMCCA since it went 'live' this year, and the announcement during this Progress Review of Nottinghamshire County Council's (NCC's) Leader resigning from that role. Rushcliffe is the only Conservative controlled district council within the

EMCCA region, and the council's Chief Executive is leaving, with Rushcliffe recruiting to that post.

In light of such significant change, the peer team was particularly impressed with the council's:

- work already undertaken to progress all the main CPC recommendations
- careful consideration of, and building on, these recommendations to best enhance Rushcliffe's agenda, rather than just actioning them at face value
- recognition of how to progress each main recommendation further, to get the fullest value out of them. Details of this thinking are outlined in this report.

The peer team's key reflections on the council's progress against each main CPC recommendation – outlined above in full, and shortened here for brevity - are:

Recommendation 1 - take a strategic/corporate approach to programme and project management, building on and aligning with your existing corporate performance management function

Rushcliffe has undertaken significant work on this since the CPC. It has established a Corporate Project Management Office, appointed its manager who has gained further project management qualification and recruited an additional officer. The manager has identified and is co-ordinating projects across Rushcliffe with colleagues, and has started reporting and discussing their progress to the council's Executive Management Team (EMT). This is enabling EMT to identify and support further improvements, including within Rushcliffe's carbon offsetting programme.

The manager has also refreshed Rushcliffe's project management approach with colleagues and is due to roll it out across the council this month. Additionally, the manager is organising related training for officers already delivering projects. All this will enable the council to deliver such work consistently and compliantly.

Rushcliffe has not been able to introduce its new performance management framework including staff appraisals due to key staff absence. It has however scheduled the rollout for November 2025, alongside which the council will align its programme and project management processes. **Rushcliffe should continue to**

plan as much as possible for this rollout and alignment in advance so that performance, programme and project management complement and support each other to best effect from the outset. The council should also look to embed these three management elements together across all its service teams.

This will require the Corporate Project Manager to work closely with the head of corporate performance management as soon as possible. This alignment will continually support and skill officers to deliver projects, and monitor progress, in the most efficient and effective ways.

Recommendation 2 - invest further in staff and councillor training

Rushcliffe has commissioned a training provider, and scoped out training courses, for officers and councillors, especially on political awareness, councillor and officer roles, and working in a political environment. This training will take place in early 2025.

Officer training – at introductory and further levels, as per officers’ experience of working with councillors - will include senior officer and councillor input. This will enable participants to consider different perspectives. **Rushcliffe’s should look to measure the impact of this training through its revised appraisal processes**, so any related future training and development can be improved as required.

Councillor training will be open to all councillors and involve Rushcliffe’s Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer (director of finance) to consider their perspectives.

Sharing councillors’ and key officers’ perspectives through all these training opportunities will help Rushcliffe enhance these joint relationships and work.

The council has also updated all its individual councillor learning records, renewed its push on mandatory training, and attendance on its Councillors’ Training Programme this year is above 50 per cent. All this may be contributing to councillors asking fewer questions, being more proactive, whilst also becoming more experienced.

Recommendation 3 - create further time, space, resource and capacity with your strategic partners to identify what could be needed in future

Amongst its work on this recommendation, Rushcliffe’s Leader, Deputy Leader, Chief

Executive and other senior officers are acquiring specific EMCCA, freeport, power station sub (regional)-committee roles as these committees develop. These are crucial roles for the council due to the related, complex border/co-terminosity issues. Rushcliffe's ownership of, responsibility for, and advocacy of these issues via these sub-regional roles will enable it to best act on its communities' behalf. The council and its partners, through these sub-regional committees, have built time in their agendas for more strategic thinking. This is already enabling Rushcliffe to further build its relationships and trust with its partners, so that partners can take up Rushcliffe's offers, as well as its asks.

As outlined earlier in this report, Rushcliffe is undertaking all this work in a complex, changing, sub-regional, political landscape. **The council cannot afford to lose its current influence in this space. It should therefore build on its positive roles within its sub-regional structures to continue developing strategic space, time and relationships with all its sub-regional partners.** This will enable the council's new Chief Executive to progress the existing Chief Executive's highly regarded relationships, trust and work in this environment. It will also ensure Rushcliffe's communities best benefit from and contribute to this wider sub-regional agenda.

Recommendation 4 - further develop and align your capital programme with your economic growth strategy, with clear outcomes for both

Rushcliffe developed its economic growth strategy in 2024 to address its identified challenges and opportunities in this work area. The council's Cabinet adopted the strategy in October 2024. Rushcliffe has also devised an action plan to deliver the strategy. The action plan includes: defined actions, officers leads, target dates, progress and next steps to support each of the strategy's ambitions.

The council recognised that its EMT needed greater oversight and alignment between its economic growth strategy and five-year capital programme to ensure best use of resources and best outcomes. Rushcliffe therefore set up a new capital programme working group to report quarterly to EMT, including the Section 151 Officer, through budget update reports. This is already enabling the working group and EMT to: review the capital programme, identify current pressures and future projects, reprioritise resources accordingly, sign-off new requests, and focus on

jointly delivered projects. The council's new strategic/corporate approach to programme and project management is also assisting the ongoing successful delivery of Rushcliffe's economic growth strategy and capital programme. This includes the council committing defined financial and staff resources to these and other work areas. Rushcliffe is also working with other local borough and district councils on economic development work.

The council recognises that it is early days on this work. **There are for example immediate opportunities to work with local big businesses and EMCCA to further support areas of mutual priority and interest.** Rushcliffe has however got off to a good start through this work.

Rushcliffe is also reviewing the health and progress of its high streets. These can be too small to implement effective business improvement districts but **the council is open to reconsidering the concept with its existing local business partnerships and should do so**, whilst re-establishing its group of big businesses.

Recommendation 5 - use your respected position with all your partners to deliver further defined outcomes across the whole council

Amongst its work on this recommendation, Rushcliffe has co-led work to secure funding from EMCCA's Mayor for the Local Area Energy Plan, which has since been commissioned. This funding enables all Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire local authorities to be involved, and significantly reduces – if not avoids - significant gaps in this essential energy mapping project.

The council has agreement from its Fairham site's developer to fund a community development worker to foster community activities and relations in the new settlement, prior to the setting up of a potential new parish council in 2027.

The council should further develop all this work with its partners, especially EMCCA, local councils and businesses including key developers. This will keep Rushcliffe involved in related, ongoing sub-regional negotiations, so the council, its partners and communities contribute and benefit from each other's input.

Recommendation 6 - explore options through your climate change action plan to maximise delivery of environmental outcomes across your strategic

development and growth sites

Most Rushcliffe strategic sites have acquired planning permission, and the council is exploring and processing its housing design codes and other improvements.

Rushcliffe hopes the Greater Nottingham Strategic Plan (GNSP) will be adopted in 2026, further to its strong, cross-party political work with the other councils involved.

The council's housing design codes, including those in the GNSP, currently include eco credentials and targets far higher than their current equivalents and building regulations. This is to meet Rushcliffe's ambitious climate change agenda for its communities. The codes notably build on the council's successful Abbey Road housing development, whereby Rushcliffe and the developer have agreed many environmental features. These include: a fully electric site, solar panels on all suitable roofs, rainwater harvesting, electric vehicle charging and cycle storage for each house, and air source heat pumps, which the peer team saw for itself during this Progress Review. The council knows it needs to review these aspirations against the latest National Planning Policy Framework consultation's results, once published, to ensure Rushcliffe's and Greater Nottingham's plans are compliant.

Rushcliffe has been awaiting various announcements from the previous and new Governments to check and ensure all its related work is compliant.

Recommendation 7 - integrate climate change ambitions in all your service areas

Rushcliffe's carbon management group continues to meet quarterly to review and progress its corporate-wide carbon management plan and performance. The council's Communities Scrutiny Group also scrutinises this work. All Rushcliffe's services contribute to the plan through their aligned service area action plans. Notable examples include reducing Rushcliffe's refuse fleet's carbon emissions by 90 per cent by replacing diesel with biofuel, and securing external grant funding to improve carbon efficiency of the Cotgrave Leisure Centre and Gamston Community Hall. Through such work, Rushcliffe is making much progress towards its 2030 climate related targets, with more to come.

The council is also updating and streamlining its climate change action plan to

include carbon related service and sub-service plan tasks for all its teams. As a living document, this includes Rushcliffe considering the very latest issues, for example any possible implications for farmland as a result of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Autumn Budget. Additionally, Rushcliffe produced, approved and is actioning its own carbon offsetting framework this year, particularly focusing on offsetting within its borough.

Rushcliffe has been able to deliver what it has on its climate change ambitions because it has prioritised finances, staff and other resources accordingly. This includes making the most of its existing highly experienced and long-standing staff.

Given its experience, focus and progress on climate change, not only for the borough but the wider sub-region, **Rushcliffe is planning to work with its partners more. It should continue to do this, especially on joint agendas.** The council is already the district lead on the Nottinghamshire local nature recovery strategy; Rushcliffe's Chief Executive chairs the strategic oversight group. The council should therefore make the most of its own expertise, experience and resources, and share work with, and benefit from, the wider sub-region's climate change agenda.

Rushcliffe's climate change agenda includes significant programmes, such as buildings, equipment, technology, vehicles and a variety of land uses. **The council should therefore fully utilise its new, enhanced programme and project management approach throughout its climate change work.** This will help ensure Rushcliffe organises, delivers and aligns all options, activities and programmes to maximum effect, making the most of resources and future opportunities.

Recommendation 8 - reduce the number of RBC values, working with your employee liaison group and trade unions

Rushcliffe's Employee Liaison Group (ELG) has led this work to review and reduce the council's previous 11 values to a more focused set of five: commitment, collaboration, excellence, inclusivity and integrity - each with examples of what they look like in practice.

ELG started by reviewing the 11 values themselves, and values from elsewhere, before creating, sharing and updating an initial draft of revised values with EMT. ELG then shared the revised set with all council staff and unions to gather and respond to

feedback before presenting a next draft to EMT, then Cabinet for final agreement.

Rushcliffe is ensuring the values are continually communicated to, and practiced by, all its councillors and staff, to make the most positive difference. Formally branded, the new values already feature in the council's corporate induction process, and in the weekly Staff Matters newsletter, highlighting good examples of the values in practice. Rushcliffe also intends to build the values into recruitment, performance management and appraisal, celebratory and other processes.

Recommendation 9 - build up your future, annual or mid-term, light-touch corporate strategy refreshes from community level

A key point behind the peer team's thinking for this recommendation was that Rushcliffe has many diverse and interconnecting communities that it did not seem to be engaging with as well as it could. The council may therefore have been missing out on opportunities to work with and empower those communities, to identify and address their needs and aspirations, via Rushcliffe's corporate strategy.

The council has however responded to this challenge in many positive ways. It has, for example, developed various initiatives to identify and engage more with its younger stakeholders, potential service users and hard to reach groups. The peer team was particularly impressed with the council's work with high schools, whereby students articulately present and discuss issues they want to address. Rushcliffe is continuing to engage communities – and empowering local stakeholder representatives to lead on projects – in specific work areas such as the environment. The council also undertook its latest residents survey in 2024, which it will scrutinise in January 2025. Additionally, Rushcliffe is following up opportunities to make the most of initial engagement, and increasing ways for communities to contact and provide feedback.

Through this work, Rushcliffe is in the process of identifying areas to improve, as well as many areas that are already strong. The council is aligning areas that need improving to service plans, to enhance delivery, budget and further survey work. This work is also informing the council's revised communications - and now also engagement – strategy and action plan, which Rushcliffe is launching in January 2025. The council will also conduct an enhanced mid-term review in 2025 with a view

to plan more comprehensive community engagement activities.

In terms of areas to improve, and in relation to this recommendation, Rushcliffe and the peer team identified that increasing opportunities for local communities to influence local decisions could be a key area to focus on. Additionally, Rushcliffe's diverse groups make up a notable proportion of the borough's population but their specific needs, and the council's response to them, are not yet clear. If those needs were clear and addressed, this would make even better use of Rushcliffe's resources, and potentially build more trust in, and participation with, the council.

Rushcliffe should therefore further progress all its latest communications and engagement work, especially with its various demographic groups, to help address this and make the most of this momentum in responding to this recommendation more generally.

The peer team recognises however that the council has made notable progress on this recommendation in the round, especially regarding community engagement.

The council and the peer team also recognise that some of Rushcliffe's current methodology for engaging/surveying its residents is not statistically valid; respondents for example can be self-selecting. **Rushcliffe should therefore undertake work to ensure such future results reflect the communities, including various demographic groups, whom the council serves.** These opportunities include targeted approaches for different demographic groups, to ensure their feedback is collated and responded to.

The council already holds cultural events and services such as its Lunar New Year event and Mandarin translation. **Rushcliffe need only therefore continue its good work on this.** This will ensure the council genuinely strives towards, and delivers, the best services and outcomes for all its communities. In doing so, it will make the best use of Rushcliffe's resources, and likely enhance communities' perception and trust in the council to deliver for and engage with them. This could potentially be positively reflected through feedback in the next residents survey.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Rushcliffe for undertaking this Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how the council wishes to progress.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector led improvement, there is an ongoing 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 council and the LGA, and his email address is mark.edgell@local.gov.uk.