

Enabling learning, development and improvement

Being a peer as part
of the LGA corporate peer
challenge programme

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Executive summary

Corporate Peer Challenge is a core element of the Local Government Association's (LGA) sector-led improvement offer to local authorities. Managed and delivered by the sector on behalf of the sector, the peer challenge process is designed to support councils to take responsibility for their own improvement.

At the heart of the process are local government officers and councillors who voluntarily spend their time as 'peers' at a council they have no direct association with to contribute to its improvement and learning. It is an incredibly powerful demonstration of a 'sector-led' approach. As fellow local government practitioners, peers bring an immediate credibility, trust and mutual respect to the challenge process.

The recent independent external evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme, Supporting Councils to Succeed (January 2014), makes the point that the sustained success of the programme relies upon the participation of high-quality peers. It stresses the importance of councils continuing to understand the benefits of releasing their senior officers and councillors to participate in peer challenges.

So what are those benefits? This publication shares some of the experiences and opinions of local government officers, elected members and others who have participated as peers in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Programme. The contributions featured show that the benefits are wide, varied and sometimes personal. But there are some common themes that emerge from many of the experiences shared, including:

Sharing learning and practice across the sector

Being a peer is about giving and receiving. Peers are motivated to participate in a peer challenge by the opportunity to gain ideas and good practice and make comparisons with their own authority. Sharing knowledge and learning is a key feature of the interaction that occurs during the peer challenge process. Peers provide challenge and reassurance and in doing so draw on practice from their own organisations, helping to challenge poor practice and raise performance standards across the sector. But they almost always take something 'back to the ranch' too. Often the peer challenge is a catalyst for continued informal relationships, networks and sharing of knowledge and learning. Mutual learning not only occurs between council and peers, but amongst and across the peer team too. Peers learn about practice in the council they are visiting, but can also benefit from the learning they gain from the other councils and organisations represented on the peer team. There is clearly considerable added value generated by the learning which peers take back to their own authorities.

Building the capacity of the sector, now and for the future

Being a peer offers an un-rivalled personal learning and development experience, even for the most accomplished professionals and long-serving councillors. Many describe it as a form of 'action learning'. For some, peer work is a way for strategic leaders to hone the new and much more complex skills set needed for local government of tomorrow.

The Corporate Peer Challenge programme is also helping to support the professional and personal development for future leaders. For example, national management trainees from the National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) are offered opportunities to join a peer team which provides a powerful insight and induction to local government and unparalleled access to senior figures in the sector. Acquaintances made and relationships formed through peer challenges help join practitioners up across the sector and beyond, encourage collaboration and make a contribution to the sector becoming more joined up and resilient.

Providing value for money

Councils have contributed more than 2,500 days of senior councillor and officer time to corporate peer challenge teams (as of end of March 2014). This represents a considerable investment by the sector in its own improvement which is equivalent to millions of pounds worth of consultancy. Peers offer the current practitioner experience and political awareness and understanding that consultants cannot, and in that sense are often more relevant and cost the sector significantly less. Participating in peer challenges demonstrates the realism of officers and councillors recognising a wider responsibility to the sector and being willing to volunteer time to contribute to this. It is clear for a relatively small investment of time the benefits to individuals, authorities and for local government as a whole are huge.

1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenges are delivered by teams of local government officers and councillors. Working as a team led by a serving chief executive and supported by an LGA peer challenge manager, peers spend time at a council to help it with its improvement and learning. Peer teams are put together by the LGA and their make-up reflects the focus of the peer challenge. Peers are selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with the council receiving the peer challenge.

Increasingly councils are requesting that peer teams include senior executives from outside of local government. About 1 in 5 of Corporate Peer Challenges delivered to date has involved someone from an organisation other than a local authority. Peer teams and councils have benefitted from the participation of managers from a range of organisations including the private sector, voluntary sector and academia who have volunteered their time.

The current LGA Peer Challenge programme has been in place since June 2011. Since then over two thirds of the sector have participated in it, through receiving a peer challenge or providing peers. The Corporate Peer Challenge programme alone has seen more than 130 councils receiving a corporate peer challenge (as of March 2014), enabling more than 2,500 days of peer support and challenge to be provided to councils. If you were to include other peer challenge programmes then that figure more than doubles.

A recent independent external evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme by Cardiff Business School (January 2014) concluded that peer challenge has a positive impact for the council receiving it. Peer Challenges help facilitate better councillor-officer relationships, and bring about improvements in medium term financial planning, partnership working, performance management and engagement with communities.

But the benefits stretch far beyond that which the receiving council derives. Essentially for every council that commissions and receives a peer challenge, four or five other councils, organisations or individuals benefit directly too. Just as councils who have experienced a Corporate Peer Challenge are almost always strong advocates for it, officers and elected members who participate as peers positively and enthusiastically promote the peer role and the benefits it provides. Over 400 people have so far participated as peers in Corporate Peer Challenge teams. The following collection of insights from fifteen of them illustrates some of these benefits.

2. Peer insights



‘Giving and receiving’

**Councillor Graham Chapman, Deputy Leader,
Nottingham City Council**

The big advantage of being a member peer on a peer challenge is that you can both give and receive simultaneously. You ‘give’ by applying your knowledge, experience and judgement. You ‘receive’ through the experience of working with a team of highly professional individuals operating in a very focused way.

They operate quickly and effectively in a short time frame, applying a different sort of discipline than the ones you normally apply as a member in your own authority. You also ‘receive’ by simply experiencing a different set of circumstances in another authority which gives you perspective on your own authority. Inevitably the depth of knowledge you come away with about a particular service is greater than the knowledge you carried in with you.

Having said that the role of the member is not simply one of the team of officers amongst others. There is a special member role in the team which operates in two ways, first liaising with the members in the authority of all parties, second in applying a political filter and understanding to both the problems that arise and the solutions put forward. And when I say political I do not mean party political but political in the sense of understanding and getting the team to understand how sustainable and acceptable proposals are in terms of public perception and the perception of the rest of the elected members. No one else in the team has that experience and the team would have difficulty operating without it.

So after all that is it worth doing? It most certainly is. You benefit, the authority benefits, the sector benefits, but probably most of all your own authority will benefit.



‘Building links between authorities’

**Rachel North, Deputy Chief Executive,
Tewkesbury Borough Council**

I have done peer work for more than 6 years now and I always find it an incredible learning experience. By taking an ‘external’ perspective at a strategic level you can see things in the council you are reviewing that you are often too close to in your own authority to really appreciate.

Every peer challenge I have done results in me taking some critical learning back to my own organisation – and important links are made which can further build cross sector development. For example when I was Director of Communities and Localism at West Lindsey District Council we hosted a visit by staff from East Hertfordshire District Council as a direct result of my involvement in a peer challenge there in December 2012. This helped share ideas and approaches to similar problems, greatly supporting team and individual staff development. The costs of arranging for attendance at conferences or seminars would not have had the same level of positive development achieved by this officer to officer learning and my investment of 3 days in the peer challenge process is excellent value for money when assessed against this cost.

The current LGA corporate peer challenge offer is absolutely not inspection – and as a result has been even more powerful in building links between local authorities, officers and members at a time when we need to harness all of the talent available in the sector to face the challenges of the future.



‘On-the-coalface learning’

**Gavin Jones, Chief Executive,
Swindon Borough Council**

One of the great things about local government is that there are many organisations doing the same things for their respective places. Context may differ, but we share a common goal - trying to improve the overall wellbeing of our people and our places.

Peer challenge is on-the-coalface learning. Because it is not your own council that you are considering, you are better able to sit back, be objective, extract the learning and make comparisons with your own authority.

When I come back to Swindon after a peer challenge visit I can look afresh at some of our challenges. This was particularly the case after I had visited Stoke-on-Trent City Council and witnessed their inspirational approach to sustainable energy production.

However, a peer challenge is not just about learning. We are told we are ‘all in it together’. Those of us sitting on major budget challenges and with economic problems to address like the team feeling you only really get from the public sector - that feeling of wanting to help others.

I’m proud to be in public service and I feel a wider responsibility to the sector to apply my learning and experience for the common good. This is the real power of peer challenges. It is not an inspection and it must never become that. Peer challenges are about common allies learning from each other and trying to help by offering objective advice and insights.

A peer challenge can often involve a week out of the office for me, but I think my authority would agree that it gets additional value when I return home. We all need to constantly re-energise and reinvigorate our thinking and practice. Peer challenge does it for me. From where I sit I find it hard to understand why a council would not wish to engage in one.



‘A duty to help each other’

**Jane Burns, Director of Strategy & Challenge,
Gloucestershire County Council**

I have always been passionate about public services and the positive difference it can make to people’s lives. I am equally passionate about improvement – somehow I am never satisfied with why we do what we do. Peer challenge allows me to indulge in my two passions – with an added bit of personal and organisational learning to boot.

For me, peer challenge is a bit like a boot camp. You are thrown into an unfamiliar set-up in an unfamiliar place with a group of strangers. You know you are going to work really hard – up early, working late and then flop into bed afterwards with your head spinning with loads of thoughts and ideas. You know you are going to be faced with tonnes of information, opinions, issues – all of which need analysing and processing. I am always amazed by how perceptive challenge teams can be in such a short space of time. That comes from the team discussions and challenges – most over a working dinner. I find the whole intense process energising and exhausting in equal measure. I always feel motivated and intellectually “fitter” afterwards.

In times of austerity, it is even more important to look at what we do, why we do it and how we can do it better and with fewer resources. After 20+ years, I have a lot of insight and experience to offer. I also get a lot back – from the council and from the rest of the team – and from my reflections on my own council and how we can continue to improve. I think we have a duty to help each other to be the best we can.



‘Learn something new’

**Cllr Neil Clarke OBE,
Leader, Rushcliffe Borough Council
Chairman of the District Councils Network (DCN)**

I have had the privilege to participate as a member of a peer team on quite a few peer challenges now, in my role as an elected member on the teams.

Despite hectic, intense and tiring timetables during the site visits, I have always found them enjoyable and I am fortunate in always having had a great bunch of fellow team members who have worked well together.

There are many advantages in taking part. Each review visit is always very different from another, with the inviting Councils having their own cultures, priorities and dynamics. This has always made for an interesting visit, from which I always learn something new and hopefully contribute to as well.

Whilst part of my role as a team member is to share my experience and expertise with the council I am visiting, it is very much a two-way thing and I have always taken something away as a result of the visit, that I feel will benefit my home patch. This has undoubtedly benefited my approach “back at the ranch”, as it ensures I can view issues with a wider perspective than just what happens within my own council. There are many examples, but engagement between the Executive and other members is one, and a different approach to scrutiny is another.

Furthermore, contact with officers from other councils, which involves both chief executives and other layers of officers, helps strengthen my knowledge and understanding and allows me to consider a wider viewpoint when addressing issues or decisions in my home territory. Sharing the experience has definitely worked for me and I believe has contributed to my development as a councillor and council leader.



‘Positive for the sector as a whole’

**Abdool Kara, Chief Executive,
Swale Borough Council**

I strongly believe that we operate as part of an inter-linked system, where events in one local authority will impact on others, for example where there is a high profile failure in one authority. That makes it imperative for us all to be concerned about how the whole sector is performing, and to contribute to improvement that benefits us all. And that is why I am happy to be part of peer challenge teams, making a positive difference.

But even if I did not believe in those sector-wide benefits, from a more selfish point of view the experience of being part of a peer challenge team is incredibly valuable for a chief executive – it provides the space and time, and a new perspective, to reflect on what’s going on back in my own organisation. There is a wealth of learning for me in exploring the issues on someone else’s patch and bringing them back to my own. You get as much out of the peer challenge experience as you put in – getting out of your own authority and leading a peer challenge is as much about keeping your own learning and thinking current as it is about adding value.

And having had the input of a peer challenge ourselves at Swale, seeing things from both sides of the table has reassured me that peers within the sector can make a terrific contribution to a Council’s understanding of itself, and the coherence of its plans for the future.

Acting partly as a ‘critical friend’, an investigator, a problem solver, and an innovator draws on a new kind of skill set, crucial for senior managers in the modern era of local government. This is one of the best kinds of learning – stretching my own skills, pushing me outside my comfort zone, working with new people on the team, sharing views, and adding value by drawing on my experience of similar issues that my own authority is wrestling with. As system leaders, sharing our learning, experience, and perspective on challenging issues can only be positive for the sector as a whole.



‘A chance to benchmark’

**Councillor Steve Houghton, Leader,
Barnsley Council**

There will be many people who, in the context of continued austerity and cuts, will see peer challenge as somewhat of a sideshow to the bigger challenges they face. Why spend time and valuable resources on peer work when we don't know what's around the corner?

However, the people we represent not only deserve our commitment to their futures and their service needs, they need us to make the best of whatever resources we have and whatever services we can provide. Being the best we can be still has to be at the heart of local government even in tough times.

Being a peer shows local government can and should be given the freedom to work as a sector, shows councils should be given freedom to improve their communities and above all shows local democracy does work. Peer working can and does show we have the skills and capacity to improve communities without central dictat.

The most interesting part of peer working ironically is that we all learn. No council has got everything right and no one everything wrong. Time spent on peer work, particularly peer challenge, rewards everyone involved with learning which can be used beyond the immediate piece of work underway.

I always come away from a peer assignment with the satisfaction of not just having made a contribution to help others but armed with new ideas which I can bring to my own authority and equally importantly an opportunity to have benchmarked what we do against others.

So being a peer is good for our sector and for individual councils. But it's also been good for me for my development as a Leader - a chance to benchmark myself against others and to learn.



‘Something for everyone’

**Monica Fogarty, Strategic Director for Communities,
Warwickshire County Council**

Having participated in two peer challenges over recent years I consider it one of the most effective development opportunities a local government officer or member can experience. Peer Challenge offers something for everyone and having spoken with many other ‘peers’ the consistent experience is one of significant benefit and reward.

A peer team is carefully assembled and the skills and talents on the team are tailored to the needs of the host authority. So, no two peer teams are the same and therefore everyone brings something to the skills pool. Each team requires a blend of strategic, operational, managerial and political skill – matching the improvement needs of the host council. Prospective peers should be in no doubt that they will be worked hard, well used and drained of every ounce of energy and brainpower.

The dynamics of the peer team are critical as the team spends an intensive week together, working, eating and thinking through the challenge together. It is serious hard work but with lots of fun and mutual support thrown in. I have worked with two fantastic teams and made friendships which last beyond the peer challenge week – that’s invaluable in terms of growing your career network.

It’s fascinating gaining an insight into the leadership styles, challenges and dilemmas of another organisation. Inevitably your own workplace experiences will add value to the peer council and it’s satisfying to know that you contribute to solving some of those challenges. You will also gather fresh ideas, insight and solutions to bring back to your day job. Away from your own workplace you get rare time to indulge in real thinking and problem solving – unencumbered. I found that I could apply that learning and best practice to problems back home.....worth its weight in gold and certainly a great return on the investment of your own council.



'Theory into practice'

**Catherine Staite, Director,
INLOGOV**

When I get the phone call from one of my friends at the LGA checking my availability for a peer challenge I find it hard to say 'no'. Of course, I'm too busy. I have lectures to prepare and give, dissertations to mark, articles to write and many, many meetings to attend. But perhaps that is part of the attraction. Being a peer gets me out of my office, in the University of Birmingham, where I lead INLOGOV and deal in the theory of public management, into the real world where members and senior officers are dealing with the reality. It's a pleasure and privilege to be able to bring an objective perspective and, I hope, some useful insights on the answers to some knotty problem.

It's good being part of a high performing team. I learn a lot from my fellow peers, who have usually done the job of Leader or Chief Executive for many years and yet are always open to new ideas.

I find the complexity and variety of organisational types and cultures across local government fascinating. No two councils are the same. Cultures vary from the deeply damaged and damaging to the truly impressive and uplifting. I'm always seeking to understand what constitutes the 'philosopher's stone' in local government. What turns a run of the mill council into a 'golden' one? Every peer challenge brings me closer to a better understanding. When I find the answer, I'll let you know.



‘Key to self-improvement’

**Councillor Howard Sykes,
Oldham Council
LGA Lead National Member**

Peer challenges and the friendly challenge is, and has to be, a key plank for all of us in local government. It makes sense to those receiving the challenges, those delivering them also learn from the process and it is key to self-improvement.

Get this wrong or fail to deliver on what we have as a sector promised and the ‘bad old days’ will be back very soon.

Do we really want the return of Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Audit Commission, hundreds of performance indicators and compulsory inspections that measure what someone in Whitehall decides is important rather than what is important to the communities we serve?

I have undertaken a handful of peer challenges in some very different authorities over the last six years or so. I have never failed to come back with some learning myself and hope I have provided those authorities the opportunity to test what they think – sometimes people from outside can see the wood from the trees and offer some insights. The challenge is for the council to listen to these and consciously act, acknowledge or dismiss them.

One should also not underestimate the informal contacts that can develop. I am still in touch with officers and members (of all parties and none) in places I visited years ago.

My last tip for both a peer and for the council subject to the challenge is preparation. Like most things in life you get out of it what you put in it. Plan, be clear what you want, what you want tested or observed and listen and reflect on what you are told. Do that and it will guarantee everybody involved will learn loads and the process will be worthwhile.



'A valuable insight'

**Tomi Moronkola, Management Trainee,
National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) ,
now Housing Options Officer, London Borough of Brent**

One of the most insightful and interesting opportunities I was given whilst on the NGDP was being able to participate in a peer challenge. In the peer challenge I was involved in, myself, a lead Councillor and very senior officers were asked to assist a council in their shift towards becoming a co-operative council. Having never participated in a peer challenge before, I didn't know what to expect, but I quickly learnt how important the process is in helping local authorities achieve their goals and objectives when working towards continuous self-improvement.

The peer challenge gave me valuable insight into dimensions of local government I hadn't experienced in my day-to-day role as a National Management Trainee. In particular, it highlighted the ways they proactively set out to assist, support and share best practice with each other to enhance the ways they organise themselves and deliver services. By working with senior officers, I learnt from their approach to problem solving, found out about their career journeys and views on key issues within local government. I also engaged with a mixture of residents, officers and councillors giving me a deeper understanding of how different parties view the work of the council. Moreover, I developed an invaluable relationship with a very senior officer who has been my mentor ever since. I hope that as I progress in my career, I will be able to participate in peer challenges on a regular basis and continue learning and sharing my experience with others through this platform.



‘Reflect, review and reinvigorate’

**Councillor Jane Scott, Leader,
Wiltshire Council**

We all know that local government is changing and will continue to change and we recognise that we have to be innovative if we are to meet the growth in service demand and deliver community and customer expectations. We need to keep learning and improving and the peer challenge at Wiltshire provided an opportunity to reflect on achievements and to look ahead at the challenges and the plans to manage these.

I found the experience of hosting a peer challenge an extremely valuable experience – it’s always good to hold up the mirror and find out how others view what you do. I also find that when I am invited to join a team as a peer, to review others, it does help them focus on strengths, areas for improvement and to build on what they do well. External assurance and affirmation goes a long way to building a better understanding of your organisation and how it works. Are staff aware and focused on your vision, priorities and goals and does this permeate your organisation reflecting a culture that knows what it needs to achieve and is delivering its vision?

A peer challenge will help answer this question and I would recommend being a peer and having a peer challenge. It provides an opportunity to reflect, review and to reinvigorate both your own organisation and the one you’re reviewing. In the current climate and the challenges we all face, the more we can learn and share ideas and evidence of what works in a positive and valuable learning environment, will help to make local government even better! In Wiltshire we’re delivering improvement actions following our peer challenge that are making a positive difference in local communities and within our organisation.



‘An accelerated induction to the sector’

**Alex Jeremy, Management Trainee,
National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP)
now Regeneration Officer London Borough of Barking
and Dagenham**

During my final placement on the NGDP I was fortunate to be offered the opportunity to take part in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge at Maidstone Borough Council. I jumped at the chance to join a peer team that included a Chief Executive, a Council Leader and a Corporate Director from different local authorities across the country.

I saw the peer challenge as an opportunity to gain a practical insight into the workings of another local authority, its priorities, issues and sense of place within the community. The focus on economic development was also of particular interest to me having recently secured a position as Regeneration Officer at the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

Although a little overwhelming at first in terms of the breadth of knowledge required, I found the overall experience extremely useful in furthering my understanding of the local government agenda from a corporate perspective, which has subsequently accelerated my induction into the sector.

The exposure to senior managers and elected members and the opportunity to question and engage in a manner that may not be possible in one’s own authority was particularly enlightening. As a result I have developed my understanding of the inner workings of an organisation and now better appreciate the relationships and dynamics between district and county councils. I also learnt that while economic growth is the key priority for many local authorities, it manifests itself differently from place to place, requiring different strategies and approaches. For me that makes the opportunity for councils to sense-check their plans and proposals through a peer challenge such a valuable one.



'A two way process'

**Councillor Shirley Flint, Vice Chair,
Tenant Liaison Panel,
North Kesteven District Council**

The peer challenge I was involved in was very intense, requiring a lot of work, but I totally enjoyed the experience, and learnt a lot from it.

The fact the peer challenge was sector-led and not an inspection was displayed throughout the process in the way that both officers and members felt able to be totally open in the discussions. It was clear the Council welcomed challenge from people who understood the sector and the current challenges facing authorities.

The peer challenge was definitely a two way process, and the discussions with both council representatives and outside partnerships certainly encouraged me to think how they compared to my own council. The partnership with the voluntary sector was both innovative and successful in dealing with homelessness, and could certainly be introduced by other councils.

The Council had given the team a precise remit in terms of their expectations and areas they wished to particularly cover, which ensured discussions were linked to these areas, and didn't get too general. In short we had a dialogue about the things that were of most importance and relevant to the Council.

I have no doubt at all as to the value of the peer challenge I took part in. Being sector led certainly works in terms of results. On a personal level, I found the peer challenge both interesting and thought provoking. I would certainly do another peer challenge if asked, and would urge other councillors to do the same.



‘Enriches the day job’

**Andy Mahon, Partner,
BDO**

I recently participated in my first LGA peer challenge. I expected it to be enjoyable and challenging, and it was. What really surpassed my expectations, though, was just how much I learnt in such a short period of time.

As a management consultant, I am used to carrying out reviews of various aspects of what local authorities do and how they do it. What the peer challenge does is force the review team to focus on identifying very quickly what is really important and presenting that feedback to the authority in a way which will be of most help to them once the review team has left. The quality of what the team produced in such a short time made me come away and think long and hard about how I lead my team and my projects to deliver outcomes of the same standard. I was so fortunate to be able to spend four days as part of a great team of chief officers, politicians and an experienced LGA lead in which everyone valued the contribution of others and I, and I’m sure everyone else, left with a fund of great stories, experiences and ideas and some new relationships which will enrich our day jobs for a long time to come.

3. Becoming a peer

Officer peers

To deliver the Corporate Peer Challenge programme we need authorities to continue to make available senior officers to participate as peers.

Peer teams are put together in response to an authority's requirements and the scope and focus of their peer challenge. We therefore need a wide range of people we can call on as peers. We particularly welcome expressions of interest from chief executives, and from directors or senior officers with roles and experience involving transformation and service re-design; economic development and growth; commissioning and contracting; governance; and finance.

For further information about the Corporate Peer Challenge programme please visit: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

To discuss your interest in being a peer, please contact:

Paul Clarke – Programme Manager, LGA

Telephone: 07887 706960

Email: paul.clarke2@local.gov.uk

Member peers

Elected members who are interested in participating as a peer in the peer challenge programme should contact the relevant LGA Political Group Office to discuss further:

Conservative: William Brooks

Telephone: 020 7664 3281

Email: william.brooks@local.gov.uk

Labour: Aicha Less

Telephone: 020 7664 3263

Email: aicha.less@local.gov.uk

Liberal Democrat: Jake Beavan

Telephone: 020 7664 3293

Email: jake.beavan@local.gov.uk

Independent: Maggie Sullivan

Telephone: 020 7664 3206

Email: maggie.sullivan@local.gov.uk



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
Email info@local.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk

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