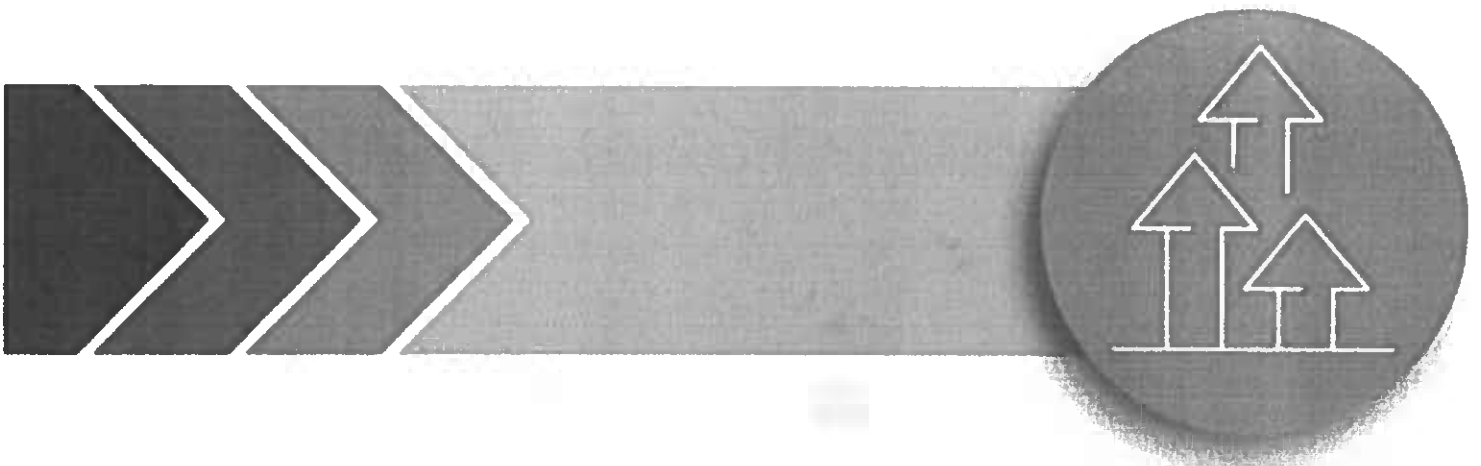


LGA Strategic Housing Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Luton Borough Council

20 April 2023

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Strategic Housing Peer Challenge during 20 – 22 September 2022 and developed an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the Strategic Housing Peer Challenge process. Taking place circa six-months after the peer challenge process, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the recommendations
- 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 Luton Borough Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month 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 Luton Borough Council took place on-site on 20 April 2023.

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

- Feedback on progress to date
- Homelessness
- BTS
- Strategy & recruitment
- Next steps: Identifying what needs to change
- Peer summary reflections and insights



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

- Lead Officer Peer – Cecilia Tredget, Consultant
- Member Peer – Cllr Tom Renhard, Cabinet Member for Housing Delivery and Homes, Bristol City Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager, James Mehmed

The peer team met face-to-face on-site over the course of 6 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Robin Porter, Chief Executive
- Mark Fowler, Deputy Chief Executive & Corporate Director Population Wellbeing
- Colin Moone, Service Director Housing
- Cllr Tom Shaw, Portfolio Holder for Housing
- Housing SMT – Claire Astbury, Nazakat Ali, Tim Keogh, David Stevenson & Sarah Markham
- Housing Frontline Staff & Team Leaders
- Homelessness Team – Sushama Chohan, Fozia Durrani, Michael Cairney, Ahmar Awan, Bernadette Oliver & Saleh Ahmed
- BTS – John Dunn, John Price & Abdul Kahir
- Strategy & Recruitment – Farhana Shah, Sharon-Lee Champken, Kleed Pantazi & Michael Cairney

3. Progress Review – Feedback

Temporary Accommodation/Homelessness recommendations– what we found:

In the six months since we visited, we found that in the homelessness service there was:

- Still a high number of homelessness approaches, circa 450 per month against a target of 300.
 - 93 out of Borough placements were made last year which is a step in the right direction and this is helping some people in temporary accommodation. However, households in TA remain the same and in February 2023, 1069 households were in Temporary Accommodation (TA) against a target of 922 (there were 1076 September 2022) and there has been an increase in the use of Bed and Breakfast (122). Nightly lets are the most expensive form of Temporary Accommodation for the council and in February 2023 the nightly let target was 35 with an actual figure of 262.
 - Understandably with increasing numbers in the costliest accommodation TA debt is still increasing and B & B debt accounts for the largest rise. Despite initiatives to maximise income collection for TA, including changes to work practices, these are not delivering. Housing SMT understand the challenges but there appears to be a lack of ownership resulting in minimal improvement. For example, the Housing Solutions team have identified the blockages at the sign-up process and accept that “and it is not going well”. There has been a failure to make the necessary changes and to ensure that “in-person” sign-ups are taking place thus ensuring there is control over benefit claims at this critical stage.
- 1
- There have been delays to the appointment of a consultant to review the Homelessness Service. This is contributing to the slow pace of change.
- 2
- The audit of Temporary Accommodation has not been started and there has been a failure to recruit to this post.
- 3
- The apprenticeship scheme in Housing is starting to generate new housing officers with the skills and experience to join the homelessness service.

However, there is low confidence that these new officers will be retained due to low pay comparative to neighbouring councils and housing associations.

Other recommendations – what we found:

- ④ • There has been no progress on a comprehensive People Plan for Housing and BTS and the impact of this was evident in all parts of the service that we revisited. Examples of this would be the inability to deliver the full extent of Planned Maintenance programme by BTS as there are not enough staff to carry out the projects leading to an underspend. Some temporary workers in BTS being paid three times a permanent member of staff salary but working at a lower level.
- ⑤ • A large proportion of Housing Solutions staff have been employed through agencies for many years. Many of these agency staff work remotely most of the week (examples of Colchester and Manchester were cited) and this prevents the development of a permanent high performing team and improved services.
- ⑥ • The staffing structure of the Sheltered Housing service has recently been reviewed following a long period (2 years) of staff vacancies. However, recruitment by the central HR team is still a major blockage with a lead in time of 3 weeks before adverts are placed.
- ⑦ • The Strategic Housing Team are in the process of recruiting an essential Development Manager position, but this is being held back by an inflexible and outdated job evaluation process.
- ⑧ • The capacity of the Private Sector Team will need to be reviewed urgently if the Selective and Additional Licensing schemes are introduced as they appear to be considerably under resourced at present.
- Examples of missed opportunities for Luton were provided where money was available for new initiatives (Rough Sleepers) but the people processes were not flexible or fast enough to secure the funding.

- Some steps have been taken to work more closely with neighbouring Boroughs and a recent initiative with Bedford Borough was given as an example of this.
- The landlord services have made advances in terms of asset management with an increase of stock condition surveys which will put the council in a better position to maintain their housing stock. There is an absence of a comprehensive damp and mould strategy. Tenant engagement has also been a priority and new groups have been enabled helping Luton Council meet the new consumer regulations.


4. Final thoughts and next steps

9 Overall, it is felt that there has been minimal progress in the Housing service since September 2022 and in some areas such as Temporary Accommodation no progress at all. As well as this there is a clear inability to control the TA arrears budget. This is in part due to poor leadership and the housing management team time has been focused on "business as usual" rather than stepping back and prioritising the urgent changes that need to be made. As well as this there was little evidence of SMT making the connections to the wider People and Well-being agenda and they have not carved out their role as the driver for housing in Luton 2040.

10 Luton Council have embarked on a Transformation programme, and this is an opportunity to address the areas for improvement that have not progressed in the Action Plan. The review of the Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation that has recently commenced will greatly assist this. However, this will not be effective if it does not take place without a comprehensive People Plan for Housing as recommended in September 2022. This plan not only needs to address the staff retention and recruitment, pay and reward and succession issues in the housing service but also the need for effective collaborative and integrated leadership in this area.

The LGA would like to thank Luton Borough Council for undertaking an LGA Strategic Housing 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.

Rachel Litherland (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk