

Rising to the challenge:

Lessons of sector-led improvement in local government

June 2019

This collection of 'stories' on the impact of sector-led improvement was commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA).

Would like to thank all the leaders and chief executives that participated in this project.

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Executive Summary

This report draws on a series of interviews with the leaders and chief executives of 19 councils which have hosted corporate peer challenges or received sustained improvement support from the Local Government Association. The aim of the interviews was to capture stories of the experience of sector-led improvement (SLI) and its impact in the words of the people involved. It is hoped that this will help to disseminate learning from the process, encourage those councils which have not participated in the process to do so and to demonstrate the robustness and impact of the sector-led improvement.

Timing

None of the interviewees challenged the LGA's view that every council should host a corporate peer challenge (CPC) every four or five years, but these interviews show that a CPC can be most impactful when it coincides with the appointment or election of a new leader or chief executive or with a particular point in a council's improvement journey.

The team

The composition of the peer challenge team is critically important. The interviewees placed particular emphasis on the need for the leader of the host council to trust and respect the member peer. The ability of the host council to influence the composition of the team is widely seen as a way of building confidence in the process rather than undermining its robustness.

The self-assessment/position statement

One surprising finding from the interviews is the value that interviewees, particularly chief executives, place on the self-assessment process. It is widely seen as providing a much-needed opportunity for reflection on how a council is performing. Many councils are using the material they pulled together for the self-assessment as a resource for their corporate strategy and business plan.

The CPC onsite element

Leaders and chief executives used words such as exhausting, challenging, busy and worthwhile to describe the onsite element of the CPC. The informal briefings at the end of each day between the host chief executive and the peer chief executive and between the council leader and her or his opposite number are pointed to as being particularly important. They provide a safe space for honest conversations about the council and way the leader and chief executive are fulfilling their roles.

A robust tool

It is clear from these interviews that, from the perspectives of the leaders and chief executives involved, the corporate peer challenge process feels robust and challenging. Many compare it to inspection processes often stressing the fact that they approach a CPC seeking challenge in the spirit of learning and improvement, whereas the primary task in an inspection is to present the council in the best possible light. In essence, what these interviews highlight is the difference between a spot check (an inspection) and an improvement tool which can help to create the conditions for sustained change (sector-led improvement).

Impact

The interviews capture numerous examples of the impact of sector-led improvement and corporate peer challenges. Interviews cite different types of impact including:

- The power of validation as a way of boosting a council's confidence and enabling it to address a further set of challenges and opportunities;
- Challenging the council to grasp particular issues, in some cases giving the council a wakeup call;
- Reinforcing messages that are given extra weight through the CPC process;
- Strengthening the arm of a council's managerial and political leadership and, in some circumstances, providing support when there is a change in leadership.

Themes and issues

A number of common themes were raised in the CPCs in the scope of this research. They are:

- The need for a coherent vision for the council and/or place;
- The need for a council to "get out more" working with communities and partners;
- Financial sustainability and commercialisation;
- Governance;
- Member/officer relations;
- Localities and neighbourhoods.

Sustained intensive support

Several of the councils involved in this research received sustained improvement support from the LGA. The theme that runs through the interviews with these councils is the importance of the LGA as a consistent source of informal advice and support to councils in the most difficult and challenging circumstances. Much of this support is below the radar, particularly at the time, but it is striking evidence of the willingness and capacity of the sector as a whole to take collective responsibility for its performance.

Reflections

One overarching reflection on the interviews is that the attributes of sector-led improvement and corporate peer challenges mirror many of the attributes of an effective council. Words and phrases such as reflective, a learning culture, an appetite for constructive challenge, open, transparent and accessible are used to describe both. The previous experience of places such as Rotherham and Tower Hamlets shows what happens when these attributes are not in place. These interviews show the benefit they bring in the context of sector-led improvement. The question is how can they can become embedded in "how we do things round here" in every council?

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Sector-led improvement (SLI) is a distinctive approach to improvement put in place by local authorities and the Local Government Association (LGA). It is based on the principle that councils, which are accountable locally, not nationally, are responsible for their own performance. It reflects a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole supported by the LGA which provides tools and support.
- 1.2 Corporate peer challenge (CPC) is the jewel in the crown of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer, other components of which include: more targeted peer challenges; mentoring and member peer support; and bespoke support for individual councils, particularly those in difficult circumstances, including government intervention.
- 1.3 The LGA commissioned Shared Intelligence to collect and curate stories of the experience and impact of sector-led improvement in the words of the leaders and chief executives concerned. The aim of the research is to: collect and disseminate learning from the process across the sector; contribute to the evidence base to encourage councils which have not yet participated in the programme to do so; and to help to demonstrate the robustness and impact of the process.
- 1.4 Capturing the stories in the words of leaders and chief executives through verbatim interviews is important so that the learning resonates with their peers in local government. The interviews were carried out in 19 councils¹. In most of these places the focus of the interviews was on the council's experience with CPC. But, in five places the interviews explored the experience of more sustained support from the LGA: Rochdale, Rotherham, Tower Hamlets and West Somerset and Taunton Deane.
- 1.5 This report captures the key findings from the interviews under three headings:
- The process for delivering CPCs and other forms of sector-led improvement (SLI);
 - The robustness of the process, and;
 - The impact of the support.
- 1.6 The report also captures some of the themes and issues highlighted which the interviewees considered were most significant. The final sections report perceptions of the impact of more sustained intensive support.

¹ A list of the councils is included in the annex

2 The Process

2.1 This section summarises the reflections of leaders and chief executives on the CPC and SLI process. In relation to CPCs it looks in particular at: the timing of CPCs; the composition of the challenge teams; the self-assessment process; and the onsite element itself. This section also captures perceptions on more sustained support and the added value of leaders and chief executives both hosting and delivering peer challenges.

Timing

2.2 There is a widely held view, to which many leaders and chief executives subscribe, that there is a never a “right” or “wrong” time for a CPC and that the LGA’s advice that councils should host a challenge once every four to five years is sound.

2.3 These interviews demonstrate that CPCs can be particularly impactful when they coincide with the appointment or election of a new chief executive or leader or with a particular point in a council’s improvement journey.

2.4 In Cornwall, for example, the CPC took place early in the tenure of both Cllr Adam Paynter as leader and Kate Kennally as chief executive. Cllr Paynter said: “I had my own political priorities about what I wanted to do, and it was obviously good also to test those and to test whether the organisation was in a position to deliver on the priorities we had as a cabinet.” For Kate Kennally, taking on a chief executive role for the first time, “the peer challenge was a great learning opportunity to check through the way we were working as an authority.”

2.5 In Hertfordshire County Council the CPC was planned to support the new leader but fortuitously it also coincided with the appointment of a new chief executive. The outgoing chief executive John Wood commented; “This is a watershed moment for the organisation, so absolutely a driving force was to get an insight into the organisation, but more importantly into where they [the new leader and chief executive] should be taking the organisation.”

2.6 Changes of council leader are often not planned and three leaders who were appointed after a CPC found the feedback extremely useful in their early months in post. Cllr Patrick Harley, who became leader of Dudley shortly after its CPC said; “As a new council leader without the peer review you’d probably be falling back on old habits....Whereas having the peer review provides a sort of matrix to think about the need to go in this or that direction, by using the peer review it has steered us to where we need to go and helped us to do some of the things we wanted to do....If you are a new council leader get the LGA in. It is absolutely invaluable.”

2.7 Cllr Rob Gledhill became leader of Thurrock shortly after his council’s CPC. He recalled: “Any politician will go into a leadership position, especially when they’ve been an opposition lead for a number of years, with some pre-conceptions as to what needs fixing...and what really needs to happen across the whole local authority. So having a peer challenge done literally a few months beforehand which highlighted a few issues was quite key. Obviously you’re still going to be trying to make your mark as soon as possible, with but with a peer challenge you are looking at a much longer

term vision of how to make the local authority a lot more user-friendly, a lot more effective and to ensure that the residents are getting value for money.”

- 2.8 Interviewees also referred to the value of CPCs at different points in their tenure. Referring to the challenges facing a chief executive who has been in post for several years, Tom Riordan, chief executive at Leeds City Council, said the timing of its review coincided with “the difficult third album stage of being a chief executive”.
- 2.9 Other interviewees referred to the timing of a CPC coinciding with a key point in a council’s improvement journey. In Sandwell, the peer challenge took place as the council was moving on from dealing with a number of significant standards issues. Chief executive Jan Britton said: “We really wanted the peer review to validate the sense in which we were moving on and making progress. We wanted a sense check at that point where we were putting those problems behind us and moving into a new era.”
- 2.10 In the case of both Luton and Craven their first CPC had highlighted the need for each council to pursue significant change. Their more recent second CPC, four to five years later, were seen as an opportunity for a stock take on the progress they have made and to reset their focus for the coming period. Craven’s chief executive Paul Shevlin explained: “So, we had our peer challenge in 2012 and then we had what I regard as the follow up in 2017, and I think five years was good timing for us. So why 2017? One, it was a check on what we thought, we hoped, we’d achieved and the progress we’d made since 2012, but also, and this is what the peer challenge provided for us, that challenge going forward.”
- 2.11 Similarly, when he was appointed as chief executive of the London Borough of Redbridge, senior members made it clear to Andy Donald that they saw the need for significant change. He said that: “in order to help deliver that change agenda I wanted to have the benefit of other people’s perspectives on the organisation, to challenge that, to highlight areas that I may have missed, and to help us think about how we would structure an action plan to follow that through.”
- 2.12 It is clear from these interviews that, while the principle of councils hosting a CPC every four to five years is a sound one, councils should not be constrained by timings and can get added value from a peer challenge if it coincides with new managerial or political leadership or an important stage in its improvement journey.

The corporate peer challenge team

- 2.13 One thing on which all the interviewees were agreed is the importance of the composition of the CPC team. It is clear that a fine balance has to be struck between the fit of the team with the host council and the ability of the team to provide the necessary degree of challenge.
- 2.14 The presence on the team of a chief executive and at least one council leader is an established feature of the approach, but its importance should not be taken for granted. The fact that a CPC’s findings meld both political and officer perspectives is widely seen to be crucial to the way they are received locally and is central to the robustness of the methodology.
- 2.15 Leaders and chief executives are clear that the traction of the CPC process with the host council hinges on the respect the leader has for the lead member peer. Tom Riordan, Leeds City Council emphasised this point and added: “You could say this mitigates a little bit against the objectivity but

actually this is all about outcome for me, so it's what reaction do you want to get? How can you improve? And to improve you've got to have somebody who can both challenge but also do it in a way that is understanding of the context that you're in."

- 2.16 In the case of Stratford-on-Avon it was the choice of member peer that convinced the then council leader to agree to a CPC being commissioned. Corporate Director David Buckland said: "I think part of why he bought into the process was that we were able to influence the membership of the team that was put together."
- 2.17 Several of the councils which participated in this research were either in no overall control or change control frequently. For them ensuring that the CPC team included senior councillors from relevant parties was crucial. As Cllr Paynter from Cornwall said: "You need to make sure that all the groups have respect [for the team members] and have a part in that decision-making process about who you want in." Cllr Harley, who at the time of the CPC was leader of the Opposition in Dudley said: "It was important to have a mix of leader and chief executive experience. It was important to have both Conservative and Labour representatives on the group, in particular a councillor who has led a no overall control council – it was particularly important to have that element in the mix."
- 2.18 Other factors councils say they look for in the composition of the team include: experience of similar geographies and types of council; similar contexts, such as the complexity of partnership arrangements; and expertise in particular topics, such as commercialisation, devolution and community cohesion.
- 2.19 A key criterion, however, is the capacity for constructive challenge. As Sarah Norman, former chief executive of Dudley Council, said: "We wanted the peer challenge to help us grasp some knotty issues. So, I was keen to have a team that would provide us with challenge and insights. In choosing Jo Miller² as the chief executive lead of the team that was certainly part of my thinking as I knew she would be challenging."
- 2.20 Interviewees made two other important points about the team. First, some degree of continuity in team membership when a second or third CPC is commissioned can be helpful, providing insight into the council's journey. Second, it is important not to under-estimate the contribution of the LGA's CPC managers. For John Henderson, chief executive of Staffordshire, the balance between the flexibility of the CPC process and maintaining a consistent standard is important. He said: "The danger is you have varying standards. I think the LGA by having these corporate peer challenge managers, they keep that standard."
- 2.21 Two points stand out from the views on CPC teams. First that the quality of the relationship and respect between the leader of the host council and the lead member peer is part of the magic of the process. Second, it is also clear that the ability of councils to influence the composition of the teams does not dilute the challenge element, rather it helps to create the conditions for honest, frank and, at times, difficult conversations.

² Doncaster Council

The self-assessment/position statement

- 2.22 As part of preparing for a CPC all Councils are asked to produce a self-assessment/position statement. This provides a brief and steer to the peer team in terms of what the Council would like them to focus on. It can usefully summarise the key drivers, issues, challenges, context and current thinking in relation to the areas of focus. All interviewees identified this part of the process prior to the CPC visit as significant, but many of them found that it was more valuable than they expected and saw it as being useful in its own right.
- 2.23 Several chief executives referred to the danger of them always focussing on the next challenge or opportunity with little time for reflection. The attention on “events” can mask the many things that councils do well. The CPC self-assessment process provides an important opportunity to focus on successes as well as challenges. As Steve Rumbelow, chief executive of Rochdale said: “I’ll be the first to admit that reflecting even on success is not one of my strengths. I think a lot of us in these kinds of jobs are always looking for what’s the next challenge, how do we move forward? And sometimes it means that you don’t spend enough time looking back at what’s gone well and what’s not gone well.”
- 2.24 Cambridge chief executive Antoinette Jackson described the self-assessment as “one of the most useful parts of the process because it makes you as an organisation take stock and ask, ‘Well, what is our story at this point in time?’” Hertfordshire’s John Wood said it was “quite a therapeutic and honest reflection”. Paul Shevlin, chief executive of Craven, commented: “It is so important, something that we miss out far too often. It’s too easy to neglect what you’ve actually achieved.” And Stratford-on-Avon’s corporate director Dave Buckland said: “it was probably the first time that we’d actually put in one document everything that we were seeking to achieve.”
- 2.25 For Lyn Carpenter, chief executive of Thurrock, the self-assessment “is a really good guide through what you should be thinking about almost on a regular basis as you’re running your business.” She added: “It’s a really helpful framework that just helps focus, you know, what is your vision and strategy? If you’ve got one, how is it shaping the agenda? What are you really delivering? When it comes to your finances how robust are they really? Are you creating budgets that continue your visions and objectives or are the two completely unrelated? We all get really busy in the day job and [the self-assessment] makes you reflect.”
- 2.26 Several of the councils interviewed are using the self-assessment as a reference resource and as the evidence base for reviewing their corporate strategy and business plan.
- 2.27 The two Black Country chief executive interviewees referred to the significant conversations the self-assessment process had stimulated.
- 2.28 Jan Britton, chief executive of Sandwell, remembered that “it was instructive how, when the first and second drafts came out, quite how diverse the comments back were. I think it’s just a human thing, but I assumed that most people see the world pretty much as I see it, so to go through a process where you discover that actually some of your closest colleagues, both professionally and politically, have in a couple of cases quite different perspectives on things where maybe the assumption was we all shared a view. That was quite an interesting and valuable process.”

- 2.29 Similarly, Sarah Norman then chief executive of Dudley reflected that the self-assessment process “forced some interesting debates in the team about where we were with certain things. There were different views on how well different things were working within the local authority. So, I think just doing the preparation can be very valuable.”
- 2.30 Several councils involved in the research referred to the way in which they had involved their wider leadership teams or top 100 managers in the process. Luton’s then chief executive Trevor Holden asked his council’s cohort of National Graduate Development Programme participants to lead the work on the self-assessment. “They’re just absolutely fantastic,” he said. “If you get people who are immersed in the organisation to write your self-assessment you rob yourself of a big chunk of learning right from the word go. For us it was really, really useful have some of our graduate cohort write that self-assessment.”
- 2.31 At a time when local political managerial leaders have little time for reflection, the self-assessment component provides an important opportunity to take stock of a council’s achievements and challenges. It is widely seen as being important in its own right and as a way of creating a culture of reflection and learning across a council as a whole. It may be useful to consider ways of encouraging councils to carry out self-assessments between CPCs.

The CPC onsite element

- 2.32 Chief executives and leaders use words such as “exhausting”, “challenging”, “busy”, “worthwhile” to describe the actual onsite element of the corporate peer challenge and most remember significant events or discussions even three or four years later. The onsite elements are evidently significant events in the life of a council. Four aspects featured significantly in interviewees’ recollections of the process: the evening discussions with the lead peers; the ability of the team to quickly get under the skin of a place; partner and stakeholder engagement; and the involvement of frontline members.
- 2.33 Most of the leaders and chief executives who participated in this research identified their discussion with their opposite number on the CPC team as a particularly valuable part of the process. They are operationally important: providing an opportunity to adapt the programme to respond to a team’s lines of enquiry and to test emerging findings.
- 2.34 As Cornwall’s Kate Kennally reflected: “The sessions with the chief executive peer at the end of each day were really important in terms of giving us the opportunity around flexing the programme. If there were things that were coming up that the peer review team wanted to delve a bit deeper into...that did work well...There wasn’t a horrible set of big reveals because the team had been very good at testing out hypotheses as the week went on.”
- 2.35 They also provide a space for meaningful and challenging discussions between the people involved. John Henderson, chief executive at Staffordshire and a relative newcomer to local government said: “The important bit is actually the way [the onsite activity] is done, the critical friend that encourages openness....I sat with Nathan³ who was asking me some quite deep questions about being a chief executive...I didn’t feel the need to become defensive with Nathan. Had that been an inspection team of the type I experienced in the military it would have been very different.”

³ Nathan Elvery, chief executive West Sussex County Council

- 2.36 The evening catch-ups added to the insights that Andy Donald gleaned from the process: “Actually being able to have those conversations offline on a daily basis all added to my knowledge of what’s going on in the organisation. And it allowed a space for [the chief executive peer] and myself to be able to hypothesise, debate and discuss as to why something was the way it was.”
- 2.37 Interviewees were consistently impressed by the ability of the CPC teams to get under the skin of their council. John Henderson, who both hosted and led peer challenges in 2018, talked about a three-stage process: day one – identify; day two – develop; day three- confirm.
- 2.38 Jan Britton, chief executive of Sandwell, talked about a key point in the onsite stage when the team satisfied itself that the council had addressed the standards issues effectively. “I think actually it was a positive pivot point because having established that we had done the job properly, not swept anything under carpets, acted appropriately, it sort of released the pressure a bit. And I think other things followed.”
- 2.39 In some CPCs the peer team used a crisp phrase to capture what they had found. David Buckland recalled that the CPC team in Stratford-on-Avon “I think they used the analogy of different lanes of a motorway reflecting very different views of how quickly the council should change.” Cllr Tony Jefferson, who has subsequently become council leader, added: “Certainly the meeting I had with the team, it did feel robust. They were digging hard, were asking questions. It certainly made me think and I found it a very, very worthwhile process.”
- 2.40 Another phrase resonated during Luton’s most recent CPC: “positive disruption”. Chief executive Trevor Holden explained: “If we’re shaking up the pot a little bit and saying ‘actually this isn’t quite good enough’... then we are getting it right. If we’re shaking up the organisation cultures and boundaries or looking across local authority boundaries, we’re probably getting it about right. So, when they played that back that was good.”
- 2.41 Several interviewees said that the involvement of partners in the process not only added to the richness of the findings, but also helped to strengthen local relationships. John Wood said: “Our partners, particularly health, districts and others were appreciative of being involved. We’ve got a developing agenda and relationship with health and others on a lot of things, so actually to have a process where those partners feel you’ve allowed them in is quite powerful.”
- 2.42 The involvement of frontline councillors during the CPC was raised in a number of interviews.
- 2.43 In Cornwall, the then council leader Adam Paynter was clear that with “123 councillors, clearly just speaking to the leader wasn’t really adequate to get a flavour of what’s going on. So, there were a number of meetings with all groups. All group leaders have a chance as well as many of the back-bench councillors.” Given the council’s political balance this level of engagement was key to securing acceptance of the CPC recommendations. “It actually had very good feedback politically. There was very little, if any, attacking of the recommendations...It was a very open process and I think was accepted by people. It wasn’t something that people tried to make political gain out of.”
- 2.44 Speaking as the host of a CPC, and a member peer, Lincoln City Council’s leader Cllr Richard Metcalf thinks that the extent of “rank and file members’ involvement” is an issue for the CPC process. He explained: “I don’t think there’s a perfect answer, to be honest. As a peer reviewer I can see that some backbench members in particular might think this is something that is just being done to the

authority but that their role in it is marginal. But I think you've got to work harder dispelling that, finding ways of involving people meaningfully so that people do feel they've contributed to shaping the thinking."

- 2.45 Asked for a top tip he added: "I'm always interested in trying to get smaller groups. It's always difficult in big set pieces because people are mindful about what they're saying in front of other people, but if you can break it down a bit and find ways of meeting smaller groups of members and having off the record conversations."
- 2.46 Staffordshire County Council leader Cllr Philip Atkins sees the self-assessment process as a way of giving all members a wider perspective of what is happening in their council. "The leader, the cabinet, backbenchers...you're all engaged in a different way. So as a leader it's quite useful to get everything together in one place because you're very much helicoptering in and out of different bits. Cabinet members will have a view on a particular part of the organisation, which they should know inside out, for them it's an opportunity to get a wider view. And then with backbenchers it's 'Oh, that's what they're up to!' in some cases it's a useful tool to see across the piece."
- 2.47 It was clear that using the onsite element as a way of engaging the council and its partners and stakeholders was a valuable part of the process. In Leeds and Cornwall, the CPC was followed up in interesting ways. Tom Riordan ran an all-staff briefing on the feedback on the Monday following the CPC. And in Cornwall members of the CPC team were invited back to brief all councillors on the findings as a way of maintaining cross-party engagement in the process.
- 2.48 The fact that participants in a CPC are able to recall details of the visit three or four years later is a testament to the power of the process and the intensity of the process itself. What is also clear from these interviews is the value of the sessions between the lead peers and the host leader and chief executive at the end of each day. For many interviewees this provided a valuable safe space for informal conversations about how they perform their role.
- 2.49 Reflecting on West Berkshire's experience of peer support former leader Cllr Graham Jones said: "I think peer challenge does provide a good mirror up to the organisation, but only if you engage in it fully. That is about giving the challenge team information and being willing to receive information back. If you do that my experience is that you will learn a lot."

Hosting and challenging

- 2.50 Many of the leaders and chief executives we spoke to have experience of both hosting and delivering CPCs. They all said there is rich learning to be had from delivering a CPC as well as hosting one.
- 2.51 "I think it is a real privilege to go into somebody else's organisation and to be able to talk to their stakeholders, their staff, their members and get a real picture of what's going on," said Antoinette Jackson chief executive of Cambridge City Council. "I've had really good peer review teams, a range of people with different skills who brought lots of different insights, so I felt I was learning from my peer team as well learning from the good practice that you saw in the organisation."
- 2.52 Tom Riordan is also convinced that you gain as much as you give from leading a CPC team. "I would highly recommend it actually," he said. "As a personal development opportunity it's very good as well, because it's quite a challenge, as the chief exec you're sort of the lead reviewer, which is quite

a challenging thing to do, to keep a team of reviewers together who have come together just for that purpose....But creating a team ethic quickly and being able to make everyone feel like they've contributed but still have a very focused and helpful report for the council concerned was really important. And then the challenge of dealing with your peer and telling them stuff that they maybe don't want to hear at times is not easy."

- 2.53 It is a well-established fact that members of CPC teams learn from the councils they visit, what these interviews have revealed is that the task of leading a CPC team can be a learning experience in itself.

3 A Robust Tool

- 3.1 It is clear from the leaders and chief executives interviewed for this research that the CPC process feels robust and challenging.
- 3.2 “You feel on a very personal level you know, ‘this could be quite exposing if they turn round and say we’re really badly managed as an organisation.’ It was really risky, but it was the right thing to do.” Antoinette Jackson, chief executive Cambridge City Council.
- 3.3 “It’s quite a challenging process to go through actually, if it’s done properly, and you have to be prepared to hear reflections back that might not be very easy to hear, or certainly might not be easy to reflect to the wider team, but actually if it’s done properly it’ll work so that you’ll get the leverage that you need to effect change, otherwise what’s the point?” Cllr Judith Blake, leader Leeds City Council.
- 3.4 “I would have been hurt to the core if it had come back and said, ‘You’re not very solid at all.’” John Wood, chief executive Hertfordshire County Council. John also welcomed the forward focus of CPC: “If you reflect on the inspection, the Audit Commission regime....my view is that those regimes develop organisations that are good at passing exams and don’t necessarily kick on and deal with the issues that are coming around the corner. And so, if you want a genuine process that gives you a level of assurance, whilst also trying to move organisations forward, I do think it has to come from the sector.”
- 3.5 “At a personal level [the CPC team was looking at] my preceding three year’s work, including high court cases, standards hearings, investigations. So, to have an LGA peer review endorsement of the manner in which that was handled was both important for the council but professionally important for myself as well.” Jan Britton, chief executive Sandwell.
- 3.6 “I have a lot invested, as Angela does as well, in the success of this organisation, having been leader of it since 1982. God help me, you know, you do have a lot at stake in having it accepted that actually you’ve not done a bad job.” Cllr Richard Metcalf, Lincoln.
- 3.7 For Sarah Norman, a key benefit of the process are the insights the council got from it. “There is nothing more useful actually than a top team coming in from outside with the benefit of their wider experience and also their objectivity of standing outside and saying, ‘why are you doing that or why don’t you do that?’”
- 3.8 Cllr Adam Paynter, leader of Cornwall at the time of its CPC, said that the robustness lies in the “very honest assessment” that a CPC provides. He added: “It’s very good value for money in terms of what you get, the outputs you get from it, in comparison perhaps to paying a well-known corporate company to come in.” He also highlighted the political dimension: “I think working through this process you get a very clear view which you can then use within the organisation or within your political groups.”
- 3.9 An important component for Lyn Carpenter, chief executive at Thurrock, is the external perspective that a CPC brings. “You can’t improve unless you know what it is you need to improve on, and

sometimes means you're living in a little bit of a bubble yourself because you're only focused on the here and now. You know, I'm lifting our head up nationally and internationally, and Thurrock is on the map and people want to come and work with us. But that's only as good as constantly getting that kind of challenge. If you don't reflect you'll only continue to do what you're doing and that won't improve performance."

- 3.10 Speaking as a member peer, and the host of a CPC, Richard Metcalf argued that CPC "is a robust thorough-going process that does cause local authorities to reflect in a fairly thorough-going way, and in a way that gets them to take ownership. It's not kind of top down externally imposed, it's an engaging process, so there's a degree of self-determination for the authority undergoing the peer review that means that you have a much greater chance of sustaining the changes that might come about as a result of the peer review process."
- 3.11 Sustainability is also a determining factor for Will Tuckley. Recognising a tendency in an inspection setting for the sector to paint a rosy picture of its position, he is confident that "mature sector-led improvement" can give a "warts and all view". He added: "I think that requires us in the sector to support it, but I think it's becoming more and more powerful in that regard."
- 3.12 He said the message to government "is they have to trust that [CPC] model, because actually working with the sector doing improvement with us must be the way of making it sustainable. It must have a greater chance of making it sustainable. Whereas you know, directions and telling people what to do – and I can accept that in politics sometimes that may be necessary – but it's never going to lead to the sort of improvement they really want to see."
- 3.13 In essence, what these interviews highlight is the difference between a spot check (an inspection) and an improvement tool which can help to create the conditions for sustained change (sector-led improvement).

4 The Impact

4.1 The impact of a CPC varies significantly from council to council depending on the nature of the council and its position on its improvement journey. Reflecting on the stories of the leaders and chief executives captured in this research it is possible to identify different types of impact, including:

- The power of validation as a way of boosting a council's confidence and enabling it to address a further set of challenges and opportunities;
- Challenging the council to grasp particular issues, in some cases giving the council a wake up call;
- Reinforcing messages that are given extra weight through the CPC process;
- Strengthening the arm of a council's managerial and political leadership and, in some circumstances, providing support when there is a change in leadership.

In this section we explore these impacts in turn. The section concludes with some reflections on the parallels between the ethos underpinning sector-led improvement and the attributes of an effective council.

The power of validation

4.2 "I think it was very useful for the organisation, which had been through an awful lot of change, to actually get that sense that we were doing the right thing now. We've got the right arrangements in place. There had been a period of uncertainty for colleagues that were being asked to move into new roles and do things in different ways, so being able to give that affirmation that what we're doing is sensible and the right thing is helpful."

4.3 The positive feedback from the CPC "was reported in the local press. It really does help because, don't forget, the public only become concerned if there's a real issue going on out there...So actually to give that assurance, we've been looked at by an external group of experts and these are the conclusions they reached, it really does help our credibility, our reputation out there in the community which is where it counts."

4.4 These quotes, from the chief executives of Cornwall and Craven respectively, reflect the positive impact on staff and the public of the validating features of many CPC reports. In most cases these and other interviewees go on to explain how the CPC feedback provided a platform for the councils to do more.

4.5 John Wood, Hertfordshire's outgoing chief executive, said the key message of his council's CPC was that the county was in a good position "but should be pushing on". He explained: "There were some strong messages around 'take your strong stewardship of your resources and turn that more overtly into leadership of place.'"

4.6 The impact of messages such as this is clear from the Leeds story. Tom Riordan said: "A big message around telling our story and being positive and almost affirming what we were good at, and then

projecting that out is definitely something that we've taken on with a lot of very active energy and I guess Channel 4 is the best example of how we've finally managed to break through the national picture with that win."

4.7 For councils which have faced particularly challenging circumstances the validation CPC can provide is invaluable. "It was really positive. It came at the right moment partly because we chose the moment," said Sandwell chief executive Jan Britton. "I think members were really pleased with it. I think it boosted officers at a time when...we were looking to that new horizon, and emerging from a difficult period, that was a very positive thing."

4.8 Thurrock's chief executive Lyn Carpenter captured the important combination of validation and challenge: "I think without that external lens looking in you lose that sense of where you were and where you've come from....So that positive reinforcement, particularly when local government can be really challenging, just reinforces that you're doing the right things." Looking forward, however, the key message for her was: "you've done some fantastic stuff but actually you are not quite at that tipping point where you're seeing it [regeneration and development] being delivered all around the borough."

4.9 Reflecting on the Tower Hamlets CPC, which took place following government intervention, Will Tuckley commented: "What the peer review said is, 'You could be great if you have the courage of your convictions and go for it and up the pace and use the assets you've got, you could be brilliant'That's a huge boost to people who've focussed on making sure that we progress...When somebody who paints a wider or a future horizon and says 'You could be really up there,' that's really good for the organisation."

4.10 The message from this research is that in challenging times validation can be a powerful motivating force.

Constructive challenge and a wake-up call

4.11 In many cases, the most significant impact of a CPC is achieved by encouraging the host council to confront a long-standing issue.

4.12 In Dudley, for example, a pressing issue was how to respond to frequent changes of control and periods of no overall control. The then chief executive Sarah Norman recalled: "Some of the insights around how we got a little bit stuck in helplessness about being a council with no overall control were a bit of a jolt, a kick up the backside shall we say, but actually for that reason very helpful."

4.13 She went on: "We simply have to find a way of doing things on a cross-party basis in order to make progress. It sounds so obvious now I say it, but it was an insight we really needed. It is really helpful both to the officers and to the politicians and [since the CPC] there has been a much more concerted attempt to work across the two main parties on key political issues in a cross-party way forging a consensus."

4.14 Many of the councils covered by this research were challenged through the CPC process to be more ambitious.

4.15 In Craven's case the challenge was to its cautious approach to resources. When the council had its first CPC in 2012, the council faced a serious financial challenge. According to chief executive Paul

Shevlin, that experience had left baggage: “You do still tend to be rather conservative, with a small ‘c’, in your approach to investment, to spending money generally.” Five years later “what the peer challenge was saying was ‘yeah, but you can do more now. Shed that baggage and, actually look at what you need to do for the future.” The council is now building houses again.

- 4.16 In Cambridge City’s case the CPC concluded that the council was on the cusp of being a truly excellent council and that it had to decide how ambitious it was. Chief executive Antoinette Jackson recalled: “It was interesting because I’m not sure I would have articulated where we were in quite that way, so it did make us stop and think ‘that’s really interesting that that’s what they think.’”
- 4.17 Luton’s former chief executive uses a football analogy to summarise the challenge posed for the council, Luton Town having been promoted to the first division. He reflected that the CPC team was not particularly interested in where the council had come from but “they said ‘Well, we can see that you’re here, you can go here, you can afford to be more ambitious.’...They absolutely said ‘You’ve changed your position in the local system, as a local authority.’ But going back to the football analogy, you’re not playing in the second division, you need to play in the first division. You can afford to be – they didn’t quite say it like this – more ambitious in your approach.”
- 4.18 Asked about the key messages from the Stratford-on-Avon CPC David Buckland said: “I think the things that really struck me were: one we’re not ambitious enough; two we did not work well with stakeholders.” His fellow corporate director Dave Webb added: “The big message for me was...the one around ‘you’re doing lots of things, you’ve got different visions but you’re not necessarily clear to stakeholders and to residents what the council is all about.’...Also picking up on what [my colleagues] just said about the ambition. You know, is ok good enough for Stratford? And I think if you go around the organisation everybody, most people, would say ‘okay’ is not good enough for Stratford, that we want to raise the bar and the peer review is really giving us the impetus to do that.”
- 4.19 Councils in Berkshire commissioned peers support to help them and their health colleagues address rising delayed transfers of care (DTOCs) and variable performance across the area. West Berkshire chief executive Nick Carter explained: “We tried to look at it ourselves and struggled so we took the view that we needed an external perspective. We had a very capable peer challenge leader who developed a set of recommendations that enabled us to hit the ground running in terms of what we needed to do.”
- 4.20 Nick Carter added: “DTOCs have fallen and we now have a very strong working relationship with health at an operational and strategic level that has really enhanced our performance...I think both our local government and our health colleagues have come away thinking that peer challenge was probably one of the best investments we’ve ever made in terms of improving performance in the local health system.”
- 4.21 Interviewees from several councils said that the CPC really highlighted the need to tackle some specific issues on which progress had drifted. In four cases reference was made to IT contracts. Adam Paynter’s story is typical. He said “it was really highlighted to us by the team that no matter who they spoke to, whether it was members or officers, the amount of problems that we have had with the contract and moving out of it was a real issue for the council...that was one of the big things that does affect all of us, so it’s very important that we get that right.” Andy Donald made a similar

point about the scale of the IT challenge in Redbridge: “It also picked out some areas where perhaps I’d identified there might be some issues but in which I’d underestimated the scale of the issue.”

- 4.22 None of these issues were new to the councils concerned. What the CPCs did was to highlight their importance and the pressing need for the councils concerned to get on and tackle them.

Reinforcing messages

- 4.23 CPCs also have an important role to play in giving members the confidence to make potentially difficult decisions by reinforcing the advice they have had from their officers. The role of Local Partnerships⁴ in independently validating locally produced business cases for shared management arrangements and ultimately a single council in West Somerset and Taunton and Deane was critically important.
- 4.24 Reflecting on the process the then chief executive Penny James said: “The biggest prize for me was absolutely the political confidence that came from those challenges because it gave the politicians something else to refer to other than me saying it. Particularly for West Somerset. Some of the West Somerset detractors would say ‘Of course she would say that, she’s Taunton’, so having something else for them to point to was I think important.”
- 4.25 Asked how he felt about the CPC finding that Stratford should be more ambitious in its use of resources Dave Buckland said: “That was positive because it reinforced the messages that we were trying to communicate ourselves. Sometimes you can advise your councillors, but when they get it reinforced by a third party, then that actually adds weight to your argument.”
- 4.26 Similarly, Andy Donald, chief executive of Redbridge, argued that “sometimes it’s quite helpful for a third party to suggest something when you get resistance in bits of the organisation.” Referring specifically to developing a new narrative for the council, he said the CPC “helped to overcome a level of cynicism about that kind of work... because it wasn’t just a new chief executive coming in and doing something new and different. It was actually the new chief executive coming in, getting a peer review to help us, getting an assessment. So, we used it a bit to corral a collective view of the organisation as well.”

A journey

- 4.27 One of the themes running through these stories is the value of CPCs in helping councils to navigate their improvement journeys. Reference has already been made to the role that the CPC played in helping Sandwell to move on from the standards issues it faced and it marked the end of government intervention in Tower Hamlets. A CPC also recognised Luton’s need to “play in the first division.”
- 4.28 Other stories reinforce the link between a CPC and the host council’s journey.
- 4.29 In Staffordshire council leader Philip Atkins reflected on the changing context over the five years between the council’s first and second CPCs. “Back then, we were a direct delivery organisation becoming a commissioning organisation. Now we’re becoming a slicker enabling organisation, so it

⁴ Local Partnerships is jointly owned by HM Treasury, the LGA and the Welsh Government

would be a good chance to find out what others thought about us internally, externally, and just get a bit of a self-check.”

- 4.30 In Rochdale the CPC was part of a determined drive to move the council on from the challenge of responding to the CSE scandal. Steve Rumbelow said: “It was very timely; it was an opportunity to target a piece of work in a way that really made sense for the organisation. And we were able to target on things that were about Rochdale’s future and particularly how we change the place and ensure that we had a bounce back economy. Ensure that we were talking about some of the positive opportunities here, having just come out of a difficult period in the two or three years before that.”
- 4.31 In Thurrock, the leader and chief executive both point to the latest CPC marking a shift from getting plans and strategies in place to delivery.
- 4.32 Cllr Rob Gledhill reflected; “It was really good to see the peer challenge come back and say. ‘Yes, you are now delivering. These are things you have been talking about for a long while, so you need to make sure they start to physically be delivered, because there’s nothing worse than telling residents for 5 to 10 years that something’s going to happen, and it doesn’t.”
- 4.33 Lyn Carpenter noted that the CPC approach “has really helped focus our minds on outcomes and delivery rather than just talking about things and yes, it’s great to have plans, but the challenge has been, ‘Lovely plans, and we can see you’re making progress, but where is it on the ground?’ And thinks that’s part of the [CPC] process which I’m not sure is as well recognised possibly in those authorities who haven’t done it.”

Challenging leadership

- 4.34 The relationship between CPC and changes in council leadership is another important theme. As was noted earlier, some CPCs were timed to support new or newish leaders such as those in Cornwall, Craven and Hertfordshire. As Cllr David Williams, the leader of Hertfordshire, said: “We were very clear that we would face a bit of a crunch and if there was something that could provide a platform for me and equally for the new chief executive, then that would be something worthwhile.” In other places, leaders elected after a CPC found them helpful in setting their agenda as a new leader.
- 4.35 It is also important to note that in two of the places that participated in this research the CPC process contributed to a change in leadership. In Dudley, the involvement of a member peer gave the then opposition group the confidence to take control of the council.
- 4.36 Cllr Patrick Harley who took over leadership of the council after the CPC explained: “We invited him to our annual group meeting after the peer challenge. He was very influential in helping us reach a decision about whether to take control of the council. He said you have the numbers, you have good policy ideas, you have been elected to serve so take the opportunity. He was fundamental in helping to convince some more cautious members to grab the nettle and do it.”
- 4.37 Dudley has subsequently changed control twice, but even before that happened Cllr Harley was committed to implementing the CPC findings about leading the council in context of no overall control and frequent changes in leadership, including the use of cross-party budget summits.
- 4.38 Speaking in summer 2018 (when he was council leader) he said: “Some of my colleagues say why are we having the budget summit talking about all that detail with the Labour leader and finance

spokesman in the room. But this process has made it far easier for the politicians to forget their red lines and get on with delivering a legal budget. We have had to be inclusive and I think that's a way of working that should continue."

- 4.39 In Stratford-on-Avon, the CPC crystallised concerns about the council's level of ambition. . The current leader, Tony Jefferson, recalled: "There was equally a growing sense that we were not working well with other stakeholders, particularly I think the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP."

The ethos

- 4.40 Another theme which runs through the stories collected for this research is that the ethos of sector-led improvement – openness to challenge, self-awareness and an appetite for learning from elsewhere – mirrors many of the key conditions for effective local government.
- 4.41 This link plays out most clearly in the stories from Rotherham and Tower Hamlets.
- 4.42 Rotherham leader Chris Read paints a picture of a very closed council in the run up to government intervention. He said: "I think one of the problems historically is that Rotherham had been isolated and had nothing to compare itself to. To some extent I think that was kind of self-imposed....I think that was one of the many failings that took Rotherham [to intervention] because we didn't have anything to compare to, we weren't engaged with the rest of local government, we didn't know what good looked like, we didn't know what was a reasonable standard."
- 4.43 Will Tuckley paints a similar picture of Tower Hamlets which he said, at the point of intervention, had "a siege mentality" with people thinking "we're fine, it's just that people have got it in for us."
- 4.44 He added: "I think as Tower Hamlets got further and further into trouble, and as the politics became more difficult, and as the officers hollowed out, and the corporate sense of where the organisation was going shrank. It became more and more insular. And the result wasn't that there wasn't contact with other places, but it was pretty conditional. In essence most of the relationships had got frozen."
- 4.45 The picture that Cllr Read paints of Rotherham today is encapsulated by the cabinet being asked by the opposition what other places it had talked to before proposing a new approach to refuse collection. "I'm always conscious with our members, it is easy to just end up being a bit lazy about it, and although in your mind you'll be thinking 'I wonder what other paces do', you might also be thinking 'I'll be really busy for the next month, so I've not got time to go and see or make the phone call.'" So, you do have to keep working at that, but it's certainly suck into the fabric of the place."

Rotherham's chief executive, Sharon Kemp, agrees: "I think that certainly from our experience the willingness to be open to learn, the opportunity to look inwards and outwards, and actually doing it on a regular basis not waiting for an issue to appear, being appropriately self-critical is a really important part of how an effective council works and that's actually how sector-led improvement has worked for us."

5 Themes and Issues

5.1 There are a number of common themes that were raised in several of the CPCs that have been explored in this research. They are:

- The need for a coherent vision for the council and/or place;
- The need for a council to “get out more” working with communities and partners;
- Financial sustainability and commercialisation;
- Governance;
- Member/officer relations;
- Localities and neighbourhoods.

This section explores these themes in more detail, drawing on the reflections of the leaders and chief executives concerned.

Vision

5.2 The need for a coherent vision for the council and/or place was identified as a significant factor in six of the CPCs featured in this research. The councils concerned have responded positively to the findings, recognising the strength of the case for putting a vision in place.

5.3 Sarah Norman referred to the power of the argument that for a council in no overall control having that “clarity and vision and buy-in from partners” that a vision for Dudley would provide “would actually help the council because it would provide a broader group of people that would help to keep us on track....I do think that was a clear and valuable insight and that’s something that we have very much taken forward.”

5.4 A similar recommendation in the Craven CPC has also galvanised action there. Paul Shevlin said: “It’s made us really look to the future to make sure that we’re getting the right hits in the right places, and therefore investing the right resources in the right places to get maximum return. And it’s been a really interesting exercise with some really good discussions, very philosophical some of them...It made us think, hang on, we need to have a council plan that will challenge us, that we are proud of and that we want to deliver, that will make a real and profound difference, and that is owned by the members and the community. And it was the peer challenge that made us focus on 2020 and beyond.”

5.5 Antoinette Jackson recalled that Cambridge’s CPC “reflected back to us that our vision wasn’t crisp and clear enough. What would the council be like in 15 to 20 years’ time? We weren’t articulating that very well and we’re still working on how we do that because we are just about to get the local plan signed off and start consulting on the next one...The spatial issues dominate quite a lot of conversation about what kind of city are we going to be.”

Getting out more

- 5.6 Several councils were encouraged by their CPCs to put more effort into engagement with the partners.
- 5.7 Poor relationships with key stakeholders was one of the most significant themes in the Stratford-on-Avon CPC. David Buckland recalled: “It did identify the stakeholder issue particularly. We hadn’t good relations at the time and that reference in the peer challenge has been very helpful.” The council has subsequently put more effort into working with the LEP and combined authority
- 5.8 Making best use of scarce resources to maintain the council’s profile is an important theme of the follow up to the Craven CPC. Paul Shevlin explained: “So members have stepped up to the plate. Because part of the issue was being there at key strategic meetings. We acknowledge that there are only five members of the corporate leadership team, but actually we’ve got 30 members...We need to share this presence out and that’s how we’ve approached it. I’ve also delegated more, I can’t attend every meeting, but if it’s important, and we pick the meetings, then we have a key representative there.”
- 5.9 Kate Kennally recalled that there was a particular focus on relations with the health service in the Cornwall CPC: “There was an observation perhaps that we have been, as a council, very supportive and engaging of seeking to resolve some of the health challenges, but that maybe we should receive a bit more reciprocity back the other way. In a context when sometimes the agenda around adult social care is very much shaped by some of the pressures that are in the NHS it was useful to have a team from local government pointing that out as a way of enabling us to have some different conversations with our health partners.”

Financial sustainability and commercialisation

- 5.10 Many of the CPCs explored the council’s financial sustainability and ambition.
- 5.11 In Staffordshire, John Henderson found the CPC’s challenge on the delivery of the council’s medium-term financial strategy helpful. He recalled that the CPC said “it’s a good MTFs, you’ve now got to land it. We knew that, but it was handy to have them go over it and say ‘OK, this is interesting. You got it early.’ There was a certain amount of envy on some of their parts, ‘you’ve got this early, we haven’t got our yet.’ But on the other hand, they said it’s quite ambitious, it’s a good MTFs but now you’ve got to deliver it.”
- 5.12 The Sandwell CPC report was sceptical about the robustness of the council’s budgetary position, but the council responded confidently to the challenge. Jan Britton said: “We’ve very fiscally prudent in this authority, always have been. The leader, myself and the s151 officer, we’re firm believer in hard money as it were. So, in a way the proof of where we were is not in the comments about the budget, some of it’s in the comments about exploring other delivery options. Because sometimes I think our significant level of prudence around finance makes us a little bit risk averse of some of these other avenues. I don’t want to overplay it. But I think in a way there’s a tacit acknowledgement of our budgeting in the report about maybe some of the things that we’re not quite as bold as some other authorities might be.”

- 5.13 The challenge to Craven's financial ambition has already been noted. A similar challenge was included in the Stratford-on-Avon CPC. David Buckland noted the reference in the report to "You are good but could do better" and being more ambitious, especially about our reserves. I'm from the finance side, we are in a positive financial position, but we were just drifting from that perspective and that the strategy was, 'OK, we're going to be OK in the long-run, government are going to give us some more money so let's just use some of our reserves to prop ourselves up.' And that was challenged by the peer review team. They said: 'Well, you only get to use these once, why not invest those reserves to generate an ongoing return for you?'
- 5.14 Some councils asked the CPC team to look at their approach to commercial activity. Lincoln's chief executive, Angela Andrews recalled: "I was hooked on having a commercial strategy or something like that. We needed something on the books. And the feedback we got from the peer review team was more about cultural values and about how people thought, and that really we didn't need strategy on the book." She said the report had prompted the council "to work with the private sector to actually think together we can do something quite entrepreneurial for the benefit of the city without having a policy on the books."
- 5.15 In Dudley, the CPC report accelerated progress on commercial activity. Patrick Harley, who was leader of the council for a period shortly after the CPC said: "The council had agreed to do more on commercialisation, but it was painfully slow. The LGA report picked up on this and said it was too slow. It said we needed to forget the small items and pick some big ones and move quickly. The way we handled this process politically is good. The opposition now accept the need for this post [chief officer for procurement and commercialisation]. The peer challenge played a key part in that arguing that there was a need for this."

Governance

- 5.16 Several of the CPCs encouraged the councils concerned to re-think aspects of their governance arrangements.
- 5.17 In Cambridge, where members had already begun to re-think their processes, this challenge was welcomed. Antoinette Jackson said: "This is quite a political council because control has changed in relatively recent history, elections are very hard-fought here, and we have quite complicated governance structures, so we have a lot of pre-scrutiny, we knew some of that was quite time-consuming. It was good from my point of view to have peers come in and say, 'Could you do it in a more streamlined way?' It's not to say we should stop doing pre-scrutiny. It was good to get them questioning, 'Is this adding the value that you need it to?'"
- 5.18 In Hertfordshire, the CPC focussed in on one aspect of the council's governance arrangements. John Wood explained: "For a long while, through various iterations over the years, we've had member panels. They are not part of the decision-making process, but they're written into our constitution and are effectively sounding boards for our portfolio holders. They get good cross-party support; members feel they can debate issues. As a result, we haven't got a heavy scrutiny function, because there's a lot of cross-party debate that happens in the panels, but there's a lot of folklore out there about what these panels actually are."
- 5.19 The peers' confusion about the role of the panels reflected a similar confusion among some members of staff. "So that's given us a bit of a platform, because no-one wants to lose panels, but

actually the opportunity to recast them, re-emphasise where they sit in the decision-making process is really useful, because I genuinely think they've been a real strength for the organisation."

- 5.20 The challenge to Staffordshire was that it was over-complicating things in the reports produced for cabinet. This was welcomed by John Henderson: "It's a good challenge and we're thinking hard about what this means for this organisation."

Member-officer relationships

- 5.21 Reflecting on his council's CPC Andy Donald said: "Successful local authorities have a good working relationship between the cabinet and their management team, and when that relationship disappears then things generally start to go wrong." He added that the CPC included "a critique that for the two or so years previous, in other words since the start of the administration, there was virtually no relationship between the administration, the cabinet and the management team, and officers." He had already begun to discuss this with the leader but the CPC "helped both of us have conversations with our respective teams to say, 'Actually, we need to take this stuff seriously.'" The fact that the message was coming from the chief executive and member peer leads "really helped both the leader and myself to be able to work with our own teams and recognise the importance of it as well."
- 5.22 Signs of things beginning to go wrong were picked up in several of the CPCs in this research. Dudley Council leader Cllr Patrick Harley referred to the CPC's focus on boundaries: "The boundaries, where officers need to go, where members need to go. Some members overstep those boundaries sometimes as do officers. So, it was about knowing where the boundaries are and treating people with respect and building up that relationship so there is some trust there."
- 5.23 Sarah Norman said that the fact the CPC identified this issue was "helpful and useful and is something we have continued to work on." With LGA support the council has developed a member/officer charter. Asked whether the council felt different as a result, Cllr Harley said: "I think it does. I think there is a mutual respect. Elected members know how far they can push certain boundaries, as do officers and it is a far healthier relationship which is good."
- 5.24 Cllr Tony Jefferson said that at the time of the Stratford CPC there were significant tensions in the member/officer relationship. He added that following the CPC the council had "tried to be more ambitious. We have certainly changed the working relationship between officers and cabinet. There's a very different feel to cabinet because I'm trying to make it operate more as a team. I see much more enthusiasm amongst a number of cabinet members than there was in the past. We are doing much more with stakeholders."
- 5.25 David Buckland reflected: "The culture of the organisation has changed and part of that, as I say, has its cause in the peer challenge. Not to say that the peer challenge changed everything in this organisation but it was a contributory factor."

Localities and neighbourhoods

- 5.26 Working at a locality or neighbourhood level is important to many of the councils which participated in this research and their CPCs prompted several of them to reflect on their approach.
- 5.27 In Sandwell, Jan Britton said that peer challenge was "a spur certainly for myself and others to reconsider how [town level working] works. We've always been pleased, and I think quite proud of,

the manner in which we devolve. We're definitely a council that's interested in the neighbourhood and the town level. It's part of our destiny. And I've always said to people who've asked how you make that work is that we manage a balance between the town level working and the economies and efficiencies of scale that come with being a full-sized budget."

- 5.28 He went on: "We tread that balance between...the devolution to the town level and the management at a borough level. But I think that the peer review prompted me to think whether we need a bit more structure to that, do we need a bit more of a plan around the towns, do we need a bit more governance around the devolution and I think we need to ensure particularly the consistency of what we do. So, the area that I've spent most time looking at coming out of the peer review has been around that. It hasn't prompted a rethink on the importance of towns, but it has prompted quite a big rethink on how we do it."
- 5.29 Leeds' CPC also prompted fresh thinking on this theme. Tom Riordan said: "If I had to sum up the Leeds approach in one little sound bite...it's that we are very bottom up. We're very neighbourhood and locality focussed in the way that we run the place, because in such a big city you've got to be, otherwise you're in denial really. You think you're doing all these fantastic strategies at city level. You're sitting in Civic Hall listening to people tell you how great you are, then you go out into Seacroft or Hare Hills or Wetherby or Kirkestall and you find that people's experience of what you are saying is completely different....It's not easy....Bringing together the different services that impact at that local level was challenging. So, in some ways [the CPC] was playing back to us how we are different, but in another sense, it was saying to us 'Actually, you've got a bit more to do here' and that's what we've been trying to do since."
- 5.30 In Rochdale, the focus on localities is linked to the wider public service reform agenda with an urgency driven by "austerity". Steve Rumbelow explained: Some of the way that councils were able to work, doing things for people in localities, are just not available anymore. And I think politicians had an aspiration to make sure that we were living and breathing their co-operative values and when you start to take away the capacity to be able to support people in the way that councils have traditionally done, then you've got to look at a whole new way of making sure that locality governance is supporting an approach that sees people first and foremost as people that have got assets and abilities and can do stuff rather than what they can't do and what needs doing for them. So that's a big debate and it's still a debate, we're not through that yet."

6 SUSTAINED INTENSIVE SUPPORT

- 6.1 Most of the councils which participated in this research have received wider support from and through the LGA in addition to the CPC, but in five places the interviews focussed specifically on the wider sector-led improvement programme. In the case of Rotherham and Tower Hamlets the LGA's support coincided with government intervention, and in both cases intervention has ended. In the case of West Somerset and Taunton Deane the two councils were supported on a journey through the establishment of a single joint management team and officer corps to the decision to create a new council. And in Rochdale the council was helped to respond to extensive child sexual exploitation in the area.
- 6.2 A point that interviewees in all five places stressed was the importance of the LGA's input and support in difficult and challenging circumstances.
- 6.3 Rotherham Council leader Chris Read remembered the council being seen as the pariah of local government. He went on: "We had very odd conversations with friends of ours over long periods of time who were suddenly like, 'Well of course we'll try and help you, but if you don't mind not coming to the office'There was a sense that Rotherham was so toxic that people were really concerned that by rushing in to be helpful they would be damaged by that."
- 6.4 The LGA, on the other hand, helped to create the conditions in which the council could improve. "They created the structure for proper help and support and challenge. We started from zero and between the intervention and the support that we received from our peers at the LGA, you know, the cavalry arrived, we were able to get the ship back on an even keel and then start dealing with all the problems that we should have been dealing with in the first place."
- 6.5 Penny James, who was joint chief executive at the two Somerset districts prior to their merger, points to the value of the LGA's presence at difficult points in the negotiations. "Having some LGA support in answering those sorts of [difficult] questions and thinking those things through was really important. That wasn't always openly LGA commissioned stuff. That was people like Andy Bates, the LGA's principal adviser for the South West, being active around that and supporting me and supporting the key politicians to think more broadly and more strategically."
- 6.6 Tower Hamlets chief executive Will Tuckley made a similar point: "From my point of view what's been most valuable in the three years that I've been here is that the LGA has been a constant. Almost everything we have asked for in that period, the LGA has made happen, and usually without any fuss, without worrying about how it was going to happen. The answer was: 'Yes, Tower Hamlets is a priority because it reflects badly on the sector as a whole and we know that you (me and the mayor) want to change things. You've been brought in to change things, you want to improve. We want to help you and anything you might need that's reasonable; we will try to work alongside you to provide.'" He also pointed to the important part played by LGA principal advisers, in his case Heather Wills and Alan Finch.
- 6.7 The crucial contribution of member peers is also a common theme. Former West Somerset Council leader Anthony Trollope-Bellow contrasts their contribution with other forms of support. He

referred to one consultant who was “so academic...he came and talked to us and I thought at the end, ‘How many doors have you knocked on mate?’ You know the answer would have been none.” The LGA member peer, by contrast, “actually was a sounding board and would give independent advice, because he had been a district council leader.”

- 6.8 Rotherham’s Chris Read was clear that the element of sector-led improvement that stands out for him as being most important is the mentoring support he received. “Just having somebody at the end of the phone became really important...somebody who could say ‘Yeah, I think you are doing the right thing. Not sure about this’. And sometimes: ‘I’m not sure why the commissioners⁵ are saying that. How’s about this as a conversation?’ More than anything that bit of a sense check, a bit of moral support...more than any of the more formal things, made a real different to us.”
- 6.9 Another distinctive feature of the part that sector-led improvement played in these places is the flexible approach adopted by the LGA and the tailoring of the support to match each council’s improvement journey.
- 6.10 Rotherham Chief Executive Sharon Kemp commented: “For me when you think about sustainability, no organisation would want to do the number of peer reviews that we did in one period of time and hopefully no one would ever need to do that. But as the organisation has changed, we are now clearer about getting improvement support at the right time and being specific on what would really help us.”
- 6.11 This has included what Ms Kemp calls “peer support light” enabling the council to access learning and experience from other councils on topics such as waste management. “We had a really positive discussion with the LGA to say this wasn’t about doing a formal review over a period of days over a wide range of subjects. What we really wanted was just to use some of our local government colleagues’ expertise in a very focussed way to support and challenge our thinking from their practical expertise and experience. That was over a day.”
- 6.12 Tower Hamlets commissioned a CPC to coincide with the end of government intervention. Will Tuckley explained: “What was demanded in our final stage, after the commissioners had left, was that we had some external benchmarking study that really tracked where we’d got to and where we thought we were going and had an opinion on that. We decided to go with the LGA peer review. It’s the industry standard.”
- 6.13 The theme that runs through this set of interviews is the importance of the LGA as a consistent source of informal advice and support to councils in the most difficult and challenging circumstances. Much of this support is below the radar, particularly at the time, but it is striking evidence of the willingness and capacity of the sector as a whole to take collective responsibility for its performance.

⁵ A team of people appointed by the Government in 2015 to take over the leadership of the council.

7 Conclusions and Reflections

- 7.1 The primary objective of this research was to collect stories about the impact of sector-led improvement (SLI), and corporate peer challenges (CPC) in particular, in the words of council leaders and chief executives. Reflecting on the interviews, however, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the robustness of the process, its impact and how local government can exploit its potential to the full.
- 7.2 One thing that stands out from these interviews is that for most leaders and chief executives CPCs feel robust. Being exposed to scrutiny by a group of peers is different to experiencing an inspection but is not necessarily any less rigorous. A common theme was that councils are more open in this process, less concerned about putting on a good show and more open to learning about where they need to improve. Inspection is seen as being about a point in time, whereas SLI and peer challenge is very much about a council's improvement and development journey. What is overwhelmingly clear is that on the day the CPC experience is truly challenging.
- 7.3 There is no doubt that peer challenges have an impact: things happen as a result of them. Some impacts are obvious: councils without a vision, putting one in place; councils adopting a more commercial approach; transformation programmes being re-booted; new officer-member protocols adopted put in place and, more importantly, adhered to; more tangible links being made between a council's priorities and its medium term financial strategy. Other impacts are less tangible: councils which are in no overall control more often than not are convinced not to treat it as an excuse; the level of ambition is raised; councils become more outward-focussed. Running sores, such as inadequate IT systems, are sorted.
- 7.4 Almost every CPC that featured in this research had an element of validation, some overwhelmingly so. Leaders and chief executives are clear about the value of this, its contribution to building the confidence of their organisation and providing a foundation for the next stage in its development. This is particularly evident in the case of councils which have faced challenging circumstances, enabling them to create the conditions to move on.
- 7.5 Questions about the timing of a peer challenge prompted interesting responses from the interviewees. The principle that councils should host a peer challenge once every four or five years was not challenged. But reflecting on different councils' stories, it is clear that a corporate peer challenge is particularly valuable when it coincides with a change in leader or chief executive. Other examples of where timing adds value to the process are when a peer challenge takes place at a key point in a council's improvement journey or coincides with what one longstanding chief executive described as the difficult "third album" stage.
- 7.6 One surprising finding from the interviews is the value that chief executives placed on the self-assessment element. Most saw this as being extremely useful in its own right, providing a much-needed opportunity to reflect on how their council was doing and often generating new insights in the process. In a world in which the attention of a leader or chief executive is almost always on the next set of challenges or opportunities, this requirement to reflect is appreciated.

- 7.7 This report highlights six themes which featured strongly in the peer challenges covered by this research. All six themes will resonate with other councils, many of which could learn from both the points made in the peer challenge feedback reports and the action the host councils take as a result. There is a source of rich, actionable learning here.
- 7.8 Some of the leaders and chief executives interviewed had experienced sustained support from the LGA, in some cases alongside government intervention. A striking theme from those interviews is the flexible and bespoke nature of the support available from the LGA including both crisp/focussed processes and more sustained support on particular topics.
- 7.9 One overarching reflection on the interviews is that the attributes of SLI and CPCs mirror many of the attributes of an effective council. Words and phrases such as reflection, a learning culture, an appetite for constructive challenge, open, transparent and accessible are used to describe both. The experience of places such as Rotherham and Tower Hamlets shows what happens when these attributes are not in place. These interviews show the benefit they bring in the context of sector-led improvement. The question is how can they can become embedded in “how we do things round here” in every council?

Annex

This report is based on interviews with the leaders and chief executives in the following councils.

Thanks to all the leaders and chief executives who took part.

1. Cambridge City Council
2. Cornwall Council
3. Craven District Council
4. Dudley Council
5. Hertfordshire County Council
6. Leeds City Council
7. City of Lincoln Council
8. Luton Borough Council
9. London Borough of Redbridge
10. Rochdale Borough Council
11. Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
12. Sandwell Council
13. Staffordshire County Council
14. Stratford-on-Avon District Council
15. Taunton Deane Borough Council
16. West Berkshire
17. West Somerset Council
18. Thurrock Council
19. London Borough of Tower Hamlets

