

Corporate peer review benchmark probes to support benchmark

June 2009



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1 Achievements and outcomes

1 Achievements and outcomes

What will we look for in a review?

An ideal authority – achievements and outcomes

- There is evidence that the council is improving and making progress to meet its targets in its corporate plan and against relevant national performance indicators (NIs). Examples are provided of how these improvements are having a positive impact on the community. Check for evidence of progress since previous peer review/corporate assessment and in the direction of travel and organisational assessment statements.
- The council can provide details of how it challenges itself to continually drive further improvement. Senior officers and councillors are open to using new and innovative approaches to improve the way the council works.
- The council and key partners on the local strategic partnership (LSP) can demonstrate how they are successfully delivering against the priorities for the local area identified by the sustainable community strategy and in local area agreement (LAA) targets. Examples are given of where the council and its partners have challenged each other to ensure delivery of these outcomes.
- There is evidence of how the work of the partnership is going beyond meeting targets to improve life for local citizens, for example through improved access to appropriate services and improved life chances, such as better employment, health and recreational opportunities.
- The council can demonstrate that it is working at a sub-regional, regional and national level to deliver on quality of life outcomes for its residents.
- Ask the council and its partners what added value the partnership is making to the area.
- Data and survey results provide details of high levels of service user and resident satisfaction across all sections of the community. The council is actively improving residents' perceptions and can demonstrate how they are doing this.
- Check on the quality of services delivered and how this has changed over time.
- Local people have good opportunities to engage with, and actively participate in, decisions that affect their local area. The council is working to promote community cohesion.
- The council and its partners are demonstrating that they are delivering sustainable communities for future generations.
- There is evidence that the council and its key partners are improving outcomes for disadvantaged groups and communities, for example by narrowing health inequalities or lifting neighbourhoods out of deprivation.

2 Leadership and governance

2. Leadership and governance

2.1 Ambition for the community

Probes and evidence – ambition for the community

Relevant and shared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the key geographic, demographic, economic, environmental and social context that the council and its partners are operating in. This should include up-to-date knowledge of community profiles, equality gaps in attainment, health and access to services, knowledge of hard-to-reach and vulnerable communities and an ability to disaggregate data geographically and across equality strands. Where appropriate, examine the national, regional and sub-regional contexts within which the council and its partners are operating. • The council and its partners have a shared understanding of the interests of all sections of the community – be they geographical areas or communities of interest – and accurately understand the scale of issues and feelings, and the impact this may have on equality of opportunity, service provision, community cohesion and integration. • Ensure ambitions, including LAA targets, are stretching and challenging and will make a real difference for local people. • Check that councillors, council officers, partners and stakeholders share a common purpose and have clearly defined responsibilities and accountabilities. All partners and the council work together as appropriate and necessary across organisational and geographical boundaries, including in sub-regional and regional arenas, to address issues of community ambition and concern. • Ensure that priorities support the ambitions for the area. • Seek evidence that the council is able to make hard and/or unpopular decisions when necessary, which benefit the local area in the longer term. • The council and its partners understand the potential for tensions between different communities and are able to visibly and fairly address conflicting demands and interests 	Integrated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check that the aims of the sustainable community strategy are reflected in the council's corporate plan. • Ensure that high quality engagement with service users, local citizens, partners and stakeholders plays a key role in informing council and community ambitions. Within the council, councillors and officers at all levels and contractors (such as internal and external providers) are engaged in consultation around community needs. • Identify whether local people understand and support the council's ambitions for its community.
	Monitored and updated		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek evidence of regular monitoring of community and corporate plans. • Identify whether SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed) targets are used to assess progress. • Ensure that effective action by both council and partners is taken if progress is not satisfactory. • Check whether plans are updated at least annually with the input of relevant stakeholders.



2.2 Focusing on what matters

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – focusing on what matters

identifying priorities

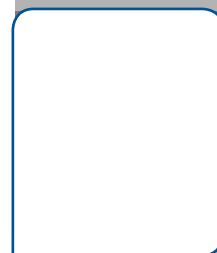
- What process does the council use to identify and agree priorities?
- Are staff, councillors and partners aware of the priorities?
- Are citizens, users, partners and other stakeholders involved in a meaningful way?
- Do relevant plans, such as community strategy and corporate plans, reflect the priorities?
- Do priorities consider the national framework and take account of the social and economic environment and the interests of hard-to-reach groups?

Aligning resources priorities

- Does the council's budget process contain a mechanism to ensure priorities drive resource allocation?
- Is there evidence of resources being moved from non-priority areas into priority ones?

Staying focused

- Do cabinet or similar, and corporate management team agendas, reflect the priorities or are they overwhelmed with urgent but non-priority items?



2.3 Decision-making and scrutiny

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – decision making and scrutiny

Structure

- Examine the political management arrangements, constitution and related documents.
- Talk to key partners and other stakeholders about the operation of these arrangements.
- Examine the extent to which opposition parties are engaged in scrutiny.

Systems and processes

- Where possible observe a cabinet and a scrutiny session and senior management team meeting.
- Examine agendas, minutes, work programmes and forward plans.
- Examine delegation arrangements.
- Identify resources (money, officers, accommodation and so on) to support executive and scrutiny.
- Examine reports, recommendations and follow-up and monitoring arrangements to assess the impact and outcomes of scrutiny efforts.

Relationships

- Identify the stage and extent to which scrutiny is engaged by the executive and partners to examine policies and decisions proactively rather than retrospectively.
- Examine the response process of the executive and partners to scrutiny recommendations and the number of recommendations agreed and implemented. Whilst working relationships should be constructive, the scrutiny function should be independent of the executive and be an arena for cross-party working.
- Talk to partners and stakeholders to gauge the extent and use made of external evidence from the community and opportunities for joint working across authority boundaries.

3 Engaging with customers, communities and partners

3. Engaging with customers, communities and partners

3.1 Customer focus

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – customer focus

Responsive Services

- How does the council, both corporately and through individual services, demonstrate its understanding and responsiveness to the 'duty to involve' by consulting and engaging users and non-users (about their wants and needs)?
- Has the council conducted user testing on individual access channels?
- Does the council have a corporate consultation strategy about who their customers are and how often they consult with them and is this coordinated across the whole council?
- What evidence is there that such user consultation and involvement actually leads to changes to services, tailored to user needs? How are customers informed of these changes?
- Is there a complaints and compliments system and is it used to improve services?
- How does the council ensure appropriate customer training for different staff groups, such as front-line staff?
- Is there evidence of the use of customer insight in service design?
- Is there a senior officer or lead councillor with responsibility for customer services?

Accessible services

- Does the council understand its users' needs, especially those with non-standard needs, for example language, physical, timing, location?
- Does the council make efforts to deliver its services in a fair, equal, consistent and sensitive way to all members of its communities with regard to personalisation and choice?
- Does the council use a range of delivery channels, such as face-to-face, phone, letter, and electronic, and adjust opening times to maximise access for users? Is the council working with local partners to join up local services?
- Has the council looked at joint team and mobile working with partners to improve accessibility for users?
- Has the council carried out equality impact assessments, monitoring of service take-up and satisfaction? What has the council done to improve services based on those assessments?

Efficient and effective services

- Is there evidence that customers feel that they are getting value for money (VFM) from the council? Does the council effectively communicate its efficient use of resources?
- Are there well-publicised service standards?
- Is compliance against these standards regularly monitored?
- Can the council demonstrate that it knows its customers and their preferred means of contact?
- Is the council redesigning access to services around its customer base and in partnership with local public service providers? Is it using the most efficient processes?
- How is information on customers used and shared across the council to resolve queries and deliver services more effectively to customers?
- Does the council know how cost-effective its services are in relation to appropriate comparators?

3.2 Community engagement and empowerment

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence –community engagement and empowerment

Involving and engaging communities

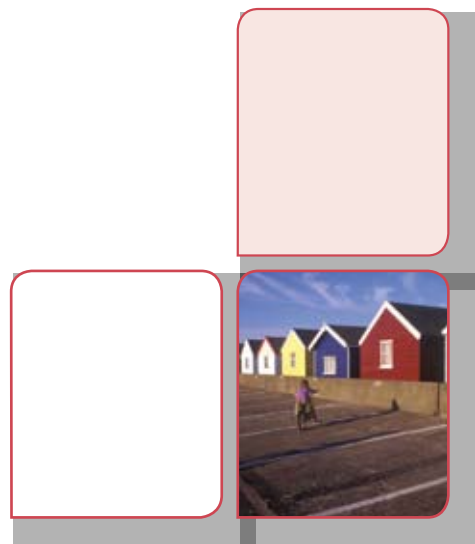
- Examine any communications and consultations strategies.
- Look at examples of written communications. Consider style, plain English, other languages and formats, frequency, and coverage.
- Identify feedback to those consulted on what happened to their views.
- Look for use of both open and closed sampling techniques to ensure the validity of findings and to offer all citizens an opportunity to take part.

Representation

- Identify any strategies for increasing electoral turnout.
- Look at websites and other sources of councillor information.
- Identify any surveys that indicate how well people know who their local councillor is and how to approach them to get things done.
- Examine how councillors are supported in playing their representative roles.

Empowerment

- Seek evidence that the council is clear about the diverse make up and needs of its communities, such as through the use of census and local survey data.
- Examine the various consultation mechanisms that are used. Is good practice identified and shared, both within and outside the council? Are the methods used suitable for particular target groups, such as the internet and mobile phones when consulting with young people? What evidence is there that the council reaches all of their communities?
- Look for evidence that the council and its partners are aware of the issues of going beyond gatekeepers and self-identified community leaders to reach individuals from different communities
- Identify examples of consultation being used to inform and affect decisions, including how the council responds to petitions and community calls for action.
- Examine structures and mechanisms to engage communities at a local level.



3.3 Delivering through partnerships

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – delivering through partnerships

- Right partners, right relationship*
- Talk to partners, council officers and councillors.
 - Examine partnership structures, constitutions, objectives and so on. Review the relevance and representative value of partnership groups and meetings in relation to gender, age, and ethnicity.
 - Look for examples of evaluation of learning, competencies and skills, and transfer of knowledge between partners.
 - Identify examples of joint delivery and commissioning of services.
 - Identify any learning and outcomes that are documented.
 - Identify whether the council has done any partnership training.
- Priorities*
- Look for a shared understanding of the evidence and key challenges.
 - Examine partnership plans, performance measures, targets and any locality self-evaluation.
 - Where possible, compare the corporate plans of partner's for a 'golden thread' from the sustainable community strategy and LAA targets.
 - Talk to stakeholders to identify what they think the priorities are or should be.

Communications

- Talk to stakeholders about how informed and involved they feel. Is there consistency in what they know?
- Examine any communications strategies and outputs such as newsletters and emails.
- Review consultation mechanisms, survey results, key messages and resulting actions.
- Where possible talk to local media. Look for partnership stories and shared key messages from partners about the locality

Implementation

- Examine partnership agendas and delivery plans.
- Where possible, identify budgeted resources and actual spend on partnership deliverables by partner. Observe partnership meetings to identify style and effectiveness. etc. How focused are partnerships on priorities? Identify evidence of achievements attributed to partnerships, which would not have been possible without partnership working.
- Examine partnership deliverables.

4 Resource and performance management

4 Resource and performance management

4.1 Performance management

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – performance management

Performance culture

- Identify examples of good performance being celebrated and rewarded.
- Seek examples of poor performance being effectively managed.
- Confirm that senior and non-executive councillors, managers and staff all recognise the importance of performance management, understand their roles and that effective processes are in place.

Effective processes

- Determine whether there is a 'golden thread' between community and corporate targets, and service and individual ones.
- Identify evidence of performance being managed at all levels and parts of the council.
- Confirm that stakeholders agree that targets are realistic and achievable but challenging, and are fully owned by the services and teams to which they relate.
- Examine whether qualitative and quantitative information is used to gain a rounded view of performance, and whether target setting, performance monitoring and review takes citizen and customer feedback into account. Check whether information is disaggregated by key equalities and other relevant criteria.
- Examine whether there is individual and collective review of performance within partnerships, with a culture of open debate and constructive challenge leading to positive action.
- Confirm that performance reporting and review cycles reflect risk and the time needed to take necessary remedial action.

Action oriented

- Identify evidence of performance management being used to improve outcomes.
- Seek evidence of action planning and follow up to regular performance monitoring activities.

Change and project management

- Assess the level of understanding and enthusiasm for change within the council and the extent to which challenge, review and learning are embedded in the culture of the organisation.
- Identify examples of successfully delivered change and projects or programmes.
- Examine the council's approach to training provision for project and programme management.
- Determine the extent to which risk management is embedded within the organisation.
- Determine to what extent the project management approach and infrastructure promotes corporate objectives and priorities to produce a 'one council' culture rather than a departmental silo culture.
- Confirm that the equality impact of new projects and change programmes has been assessed against all equality strands.

4.2 Resource management

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – resource management

Use of resources

- Councillors and staff demonstrate by their attitudes and actions that improving VFM is part of the culture. Decisions are routinely challenged on VFM grounds. Issues raised in Audit Commission VFM profiles are recognised, unpacked and addressed.
- Confirm that the council has a medium term financial strategy, capital strategy and asset management plans, prioritised capital programme, sound finances (balanced budget, reserves and balances, not overspending, affordable borrowing plans, etc) and robust internal controls and reporting arrangements. Check whether there is an audit letter.
- Identify that cyclical resource and performance management processes are optimising the use of resources to deliver priorities and strategic objectives. Ensure that poorer services have benefited from investment.
- Confirm that internal reviews and scrutiny reports have led to VFM improvements.
- Identify whether managers and councillors demonstrate a focus on managing costs as well as quality. Unit cost comparisons for key services, and examples of actions taken where improvements are indicated.
- Seek evidence that option appraisal is being applied systematically to significant capital projects, ICT investments, public private partnerships, business process outsourcing and other change programmes and projects. Collect business cases.
- Identify whether programmes and projects are routinely delivered successfully to time, cost and quality using structured method, including lessons learned and gateway reviews.

Use of resources

- Confirm that there is a realistic strategy and action plan to deliver efficiency gains over a three to six year period to meet government and local targets. Projects are properly scoped, with an initial business case, and adequate resources allocated to delivery. Ensure there are local incentives to deliver.
- Examine whether councillors and senior managers volunteer a vision for public services in the locality in which the efficiency agenda is a driver.

Use of resources

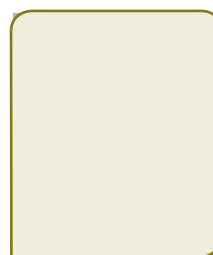
- Identify any 'as is' and 'to be' process maps and metrics used to optimise processes.
- Seek evidence of a cross-cutting approach to customer services and support services and a whole system approach to adult and children's services.
- Seek evidence of human resources (HR) strategies, technology and asset management being used to reduce costs and improve productivity. Look for a pay and workforce strategy, ICT strategy and asset management plan.
- Identify evidence of shared, shifted and sourced services, each supported by a business case.
- Seek evidence of significant resources (cash and staff time) having been released for council priorities through process improvements.

Smarter procurement

- Identify whether there is an embedded strategic approach owned by councillors and top managers and appropriate use of procurement professionals. Identify use of procurement cards and e-procurement tools, including e-auctions.
- Seek evidence of effective partnering with suppliers, attested by partners and SMEs.
- Identify use of consortium contracts and collaborative procurement.
- Seek evidence of demand and supply in key markets are in balance.
- Identify whether major procurement decisions have been based on whole life costs and community benefits.
- Identify whether significant resources have been released for council priorities through smarter procurement and other community benefits.
- Confirm that the procurement function is guided by the corporate equalities strategy. Indicators would be the procurement process, including guidance on equalities requirements and the use of standard equality clauses in contracts
- When looking at procuring services in a different way, including introduction of shared services, joint ventures and private finance initiatives, check whether equality impact assessments are carried out to prevent indirect discrimination against vulnerable groups and communities.

Strategic commissioning

- Confirm that there is a framework for partners for the strategic commissioning of services.
- Identify examples of challenge to the commissioning arrangements of partners to ensure that outcomes are delivered and resources are used effectively and efficiently.
- Examine whether appropriate consideration is given to the demand for services, that senior managers have a good understanding of the supply market and providers are engaged in identifying future needs of the community.
- Seek evidence of innovative practice in the procurement process and of systems that promote an outcome focused approach to contracts.
- Look for clear guidelines that ensure that trading between public sector partners is conducted in an appropriate manner.



Asset management

- Identify that the asset management plans support the strategic approach to property asset management. Check that there is alignment with corporate and service objectives, medium term financial strategy and capital strategy. Is there appropriate consideration to equalities and diversity issues in this process?
- Seek to confirm the use of corporate property database, measurement system and periodic benchmarking. Is there evidence of periodic property surveys informing an annual programme of planned maintenance and concerted action to reduce any maintenance backlogs?
- Identify whether rationalisation is used to drive forward improvements in customer services and productivity. Seek evidence where accommodation costs and operating costs have been reduced.
- Confirm that plans are in place to prioritise capital projects and that options appraisal is taking place on a systematic basis.
- Examine documentation, such as LSP papers and minutes, to identify whether collaboration on the management of assets is taking place between public sector partners.

Use of natural resources

- Look for clear strategic objectives in the community strategy and corporate plans pointing to a commitment to reducing the impact of the council's activities on the natural environment
- Is there evidence of the use of natural resources as an integral part of service and business planning processes, supported by high-level targets to drive reductions, such as the reduction of the council's carbon footprint and campaigns to promote and encourage sustainability among local business and residents?
- Are environmental risk assessments in place, for example to assess the risk of flooding and response to this?
- Is there evidence that the use of natural resources is being considered as an integral part of procurement strategies?

5 Organisation and people

5 Organisation and people

5.1 Organisational context and development

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – organisational context and development

Organisational Leadership

- Staff and managers at all levels confirm that the council has a customer-focussed culture where staff are responsive and motivated to deliver high quality services.
- Staff and managers can provide many examples of how they have contributed to innovations and service improvements, including new ways of working. They can provide examples where innovative ideas were not successful, but learning was obtained and used positively.
- Senior politicians and corporate and service managers can provide evidence to confirm that they have identified the council's critical workforce challenges and are tackling these successfully.
- The workforce strategy (which may be called a people or HR strategy), progress reports to politicians and the corporate management team should reflect the council's strategic objectives and how far the objectives set out are being achieved.
- Corporate and service managers can demonstrate where benefits have been achieved by tackling shared workforce challenges with other authorities and partners. In upper-tier councils, service managers can demonstrate that they are benefiting from the effective implementation of a joint children's workforce strategy and an adult social care workforce strategy. In districts, the council can demonstrate the benefits of cooperating with neighbouring districts to address shared challenges.

Workforce engagement

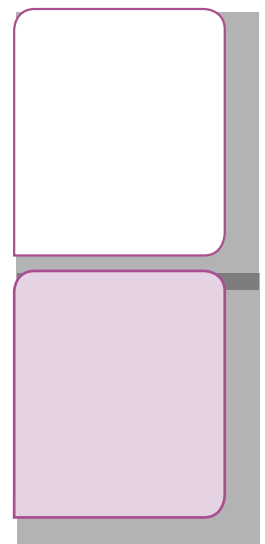
- Explore how far staff and managers can explain what the council's vision and strategic objectives are and what their role is in achieving these is. Ask for examples to demonstrate their commitment to support the council in achieving its vision and objectives.
- Ask staff and managers to provide examples of how they are briefed about key issues, asked for comments and ideas, and involved in developing new approaches. Ask trade union and other staff representatives how well they are kept informed, involved and encouraged to contribute ideas for better ways of satisfying customers and reducing costs.
- Test the understanding of staff and managers of their own activities and those of other services. Look at service user comments and surveys to see if they confirm that staff redirect service users to other services appropriately.
- Ask staff and managers whether they are proud to work for the council. If they are local residents, ask them for examples of what they say about the council and its services to their friends and neighbours.
- Examine staff attitude surveys to see response rate, what percentage of staff say there are proud to work for the council and what percentage say they understand what is expected of them. Look at the analysis of staff attitude surveys and find out what has been done to explore areas where more information is needed to understand the survey results, such as focus groups. Look at how far more detailed analysis has been done to understand the different responses of different types of staff. Look at what action has been taken once the key issues have been identified and how that has been communicated back to staff.

Workforce planning

- Corporate and service managers can demonstrate that they lead workforce planning. They can provide evidenced-based analyses of their current and future workforce issues, obtained from workforce planning processes, which are integrated into corporate and services planning. Managers can demonstrate that they understand the major workforce implications of changes in the local population and demand for services, for example if services need to be organised differently due to an unsustainable future demand for social carers. They can demonstrate that they understand their potential future labour market and the implications in relation to addressing their internal critical workforce challenges.
- Managers can provide evidence that the critical workforce challenges identified through workforce planning processes are used to update the corporate or service workforce strategies, as appropriate, and result in well-targeted workforce development activities. Managers can also demonstrate that, where appropriate, corporate or services plans have been adjusted to take account of potential future workforce limitations.
- Where appropriate, corporate and service managers and partner leads can provide evidence that workforce planning processes are being undertaken in partnership, for example across children’s services and adult social care or in limited local labour market conditions.
- Managers can provide evidence that the council’s approach to recruitment attracts a strong range of suitable candidates with the desired attitudes and skills from all sections of the community. HR can provide a diverse profile of job applicants.

Workforce planning

- HR can provide evidence that the council enjoys a positive profile as an employer in the community, for example by organising surveys or focus groups with school children, people at college or university locally and other potential job applicants from different sections of the community.
- Managers and partners can provide evidence of successful joint recruitment and joint promotion of public sector jobs and careers.



5.1 Managing people and diversity

What will we look for in a review?

Probes and evidence – managing people and diversity

Best practice people management

- Staff and managers report that senior politicians and senior managers model the values of the organisation and behave with integrity.
- There is evidence from the staff survey and from staff themselves that they feel valued, well supported and well managed. Staff report that leaders and managers effectively create a positive 'can do' working culture, where they are encouraged to support each other and the organisation in providing excellent integrated services, working as one organisation. Staff report that they feel supported in difficult situations by their managers and colleagues.
- Staff report that the organisation is effectively managed. Managers foster positive working relationships within and across teams and services, and across management layers. Meetings are well run and effective. Staff are given positive feedback when they do something well and that success is celebrated.
- Senior managers provide evidence to show that the HR unit provides timely and relevant strategic support. Managers report that HR policies and support help them to be effective people managers.
- Ask how sickness and accident rates compare to the rates of other authorities. Find out what is being done in any areas where sickness absence is high and whether the action being taken is working.
- Ask for details of areas with high turnover and find out if managers understand what is causing the problem and what they are doing about it.
- Ask for information about the number of grievances taken by staff and compare that to other authorities.
- Look for evidence that demonstrates that the council supports and encourages its external service providers to operate best practice people management.

Diversity and workforce

- Managers and staff report that politicians and senior managers demonstrate their commitment to diversity best practice through their priorities and their everyday actions. Political and managerial leaders drive the council's programme of action to achieve a diversity profile that reflects the workforce and the community appropriately at all levels.
- The council is moving up the levels of the Equality Framework for Local Government.
- Staff and managers report that there is a workplace culture based on respect for difference. Managers and staff can provide examples of what they have done to demonstrate their commitment to diversity best practice in decisions they have made and in the ways in which they provided services.
- Diverse groups of staff report that they feel valued, fairly treated, well managed and supported. Staff report that managers take the diverse needs of individuals into account while, at the same time, operating fairly. Staff report that managers support flexible working where possible, and take swift and effective action when any issues such as harassment or bullying arise. Examine the response of diverse groups in the staff attitudes survey to ensure all equality is positive. Look at the diversity profile of those taking out grievances or those that have been disciplined to ensure they reflect the general workforce profile.
- The council can provide details of the percentage of women and black, Asian and minority ethnic political and managerial leaders. Senior managers can demonstrate that effective action is being taken to improve the council's diversity profile at all levels so that, in time, it will reflect the workforce and the local community.
- Diverse groups of service users report that they are treated fairly and well by staff. Look at the diversity profile of complainants.
- Managers can provide rigorous equality impact assessments for all HR policies and major change programmes.

Diversity and workforce

- Managers can provide evidence to show that the council encourages and supports its external service providers and partners to operate diversity best practice in relation to workforce issues.
- Managers can provide evidence to show that the council works with its partners to jointly tackle shared diversity issues. For example the LSP coordinates all partner initiatives to increase their workforce diversity profiles.

Pay and rewards

- Managers can provide evidence that demonstrates that the council has an effective pay and rewards system that helps to attract and retain the right staff and to foster high performance. For example, it has very few occupational shortages, staff and managers report that they are well rewarded, staff and managers feel that pay progression systems reward good performance.
- Managers can demonstrate that the full benefits package of the council has been identified and the true worth of each element assessed and it is being used as both a recruitment tool and a way of demonstrating the way the council values its staff.
- Managers can demonstrate that they are taking a total rewards approach and offer flexible benefits.
- Senior managers can demonstrate that they have equality proofed their pay structure, and have mechanisms in place for keeping this under review.
- Senior managers can demonstrate that they have modernised their pay structure so that it reflects the council's strategic aims and ambitions.
- Senior managers can provide a copy of their analysis of the future pay pressures and evidence of how these are being managed.

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Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

