

## Appendix 1

### LGA Remote Peer Support Offer

#### Interim Stocktake and Early Impacts – November 2020

##### 1. Introduction

When COVID-19 emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Government Association suspended the physical delivery of its peer challenge work including its corporate peer challenge programme. To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly [refocused its support offer](#) and adopted a new approach to peer challenge, focusing on supporting the recovery and renewal of local government and its communities.

This report provides an initial evaluation of the LGA's Remote Peer Support (RPS) offer which commenced in July 2020. There have been two distinct RPS options available to councils to date:

- Recovery and Renewal Panel
- Bespoke Remote Peer Support

##### 2. Remote Peer Support offer

The Remote Peer Support offer seeks to provide councils with support and challenge in addressing both COVID-19 related issues and broader challenges.

The LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel is a focused two to three-hour remote session which creates space for councils to pause and reflect on their response to COVID-19 and facilitate an open and collaborative conversation about recovery and renewal plans, capturing and sharing learning about developing practice from across the sector. Each panel is made up of a small group of officer and member peers selected from the LGA's unique pool of officer and member peers.

Bespoke Remote Peer Support (BRPS) provides a longer process for councils to focus on a specific issue or service area in greater depth. Each participating council receives independent challenge and support from a team of senior officer and member peers. 'Remote onsite' activity – including 1-1 discussions and focus groups – take place over a number of days followed by detailed written feedback. BRPS has considered a broad range of issues to date such as governance, transformation and tourism.

Recovery and renewal are used as broad terms within this report – and RPS activity – to reflect the work councils are undertaking to recover, renew and reconstitute in the light of COVID-19. The RPS process acknowledges that many councils wish to use this period to reimagine and reinvent as well as rebuild some previous arrangements.

##### 3. Stocktake approach

This report's focus is on Remote Peer Support work which has been funded by MHCLG's improvement grant that would typically support the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Programme.

The stocktake draws upon a number of sources, including:

- Data regarding participation
- Feedback from councils participating in Remote Peer Support – including through a dedicated survey of participating councils
- Views of participating officer and member peers – including through a dedicated survey of peers
- Feedback from LGA officers facilitating Remote Peer Support

- Views of regional member peers, including at IIB Lead Members Board

This report is an interim stocktake based on less than five months of activity. A fuller evaluation will be undertaken at a later stage.

#### **4. Remote Peer Support – Participation and feedback to date**

Despite the unprecedented challenges faced by local councils there has been an impressive level of take-up of Remote Peer Support from the sector. The LGA has already delivered **51** programmes of RPS work (to 47 councils) since July and further RPS work is planned with **39** councils before the end of March 2021. In total, more than **90** councils have been involved in the Remote Peer Support programme to date – either by receiving support or providing a peer.

15 councils have received a Recovery and Renewal Panel and a further 16 Panels are planned to take place before 31 March 2021. Panels have typically focused on a council's COVID-19 response and plans for recovery. In addition, 36 programmes of Bespoke RPS have been delivered (for 34 councils) with a further 23 planned for the remainder of 2020/21. Four councils have received both a Panel and BRPS. In total, it is estimated that the LGA will have delivered up to 100 distinct pieces of RPS work by the end of March 2021. These figures do not include the wider LGA remote activity relating to adult and children's services.

The participation figures highlighted above demonstrate that there is strong appetite within the sector for remote peer support. The offer was launched in July 2020 and over a five-month period it has received a good level of take-up, despite the significant pressures and competing priorities on councils during the pandemic.

*"In an incredibly busy time the Recovery and Renewal Panel was a real chance to stop and reflect. The structure helped us be clearer about some of our weaknesses & the feedback enabled us to be more confident in our strengths."*

All types of council have participated in RPS to date. This highlights its potential value to councils irrespective of their size or responsibilities. In addition, the LGA has undertaken remote peer support within the Fire and Rescue sector which was well received. It is notable that several councils that received remote peer support between July and November are now seeking further support and assistance before March 2021.

The level of take-up of RPS across the country is unevenly distributed. This is not unexpected: regional areas have different challenges and improvement arrangements available to them. Some of the areas with the greatest participation rates, such as parts of the North West, are those which have faced some of the most severe COVID-19 restrictions. This clearly indicates that RPS supports an effective approach to COVID-19 response and recovery planning rather than something that diverts capacity from it.

Councils have sought to use RPS to support activity in a wide range of areas as well corporate recovery and renewal planning. This has included bespoke remote peer support work on equality and diversity, planning and communications. It has proven to be a flexible offer. Following RPS, the LGA provides additional support and guidance to address identified challenges, via its [Principal Advisers](#) and through its wider improvement offer.

Significantly, the feedback and satisfaction from councils participating in remote peer support has been very positive. Councils that receive RPS are asked to complete a voluntary survey. The headline findings from participating councils are:

- **100% of respondents were satisfied with the remote peer support received**
  - 82% were very satisfied - 18% were fairly satisfied
- **100% of respondents said that the goals of their remote peer support were fully or largely achieved**
- **100% of respondents said that they would recommend remote peer support to another council**
  - 82% said it was very likely they would - 18% said it was fairly likely they would

*“It was a good opportunity to take a step back to reflect and challenge how things have gone to date, what you would possibly do differently and what your plans look like going forward.”*

An important element of the Remote Peer Support offer is the reciprocal learning it provides to participating [peers](#). **68 peers** from 51 councils have taken part in providing RPS to date.

All participating peers are asked to complete a voluntary survey. The surveys to date have again found that working with other peers to provide support is an effective and valuable learning mechanism:

- **100% of peer respondents were satisfied with their experience of being part of a RPS team**
  - 82% were very satisfied - 18% were fairly satisfied

*“Given the fast-moving nature of the pandemic, with little time to reflect, spending time looking at how others were responding was very useful.”*

*“[There is] always benefit from seeing alternative approaches and management styles.”*

The experience of RPS to date has been extremely positive. There has been good take-up from councils and very high levels of satisfaction from both participating authorities and peers. This positive feedback on RPS from councils, during a particular challenging period, demonstrates the unique value of receiving support from one’s peers: it is delivered by fellow officers and councillors who fully understand the issues being addressed and the requirements to effectively deliver sustainable improvement. In addition, participating peers bring back valuable learning to their own councils.

RPS provides an improvement and support offer that is not addressed by the market. While a range of consultancies and improvement focused organisations are offering councils COVID-19 support, none are able to offer the added value provided by peers that have directly relevant experiences. It is notable that in the survey of participating councils, **100% of respondents said the team understood the issues and challenges the council were facing ‘to a great extent’**. In addition to this, following RPS, the LGA can provide further improvement support and signpost councils to relevant good practice.

*“Really useful; the expert panel being a fresh pair of eyes and bringing a sense of objectivity when holding our plans up to the light.”*

### **RPS: Participation and feedback to date – Key points and recommendation**

- All types of councils have participated in Remote Peer Support – including those in areas that have faced some of the most challenging COVID-19 restrictions
- The RPS offer meets an improvement need not addressed by other providers
- RPS’ flexibility is a strength: it has been used to address a broad range of issues
- The feedback from participating councils and peers has been very positive

### Recommendation 1:

The LGA undertake further work to communicate the RPS offer to councils

- utilising the positive feedback of participating councils
- including a focus on those regions with lower take-up

## **5. Remote Peer Support – Impacts and learning from councils**

Remote Peer Support is designed to reflect local needs and circumstances. A peer team's challenge, reflections and recommendations are developed to support the participating council. However, as with other peer-based activity there is also learning both for the peers involved and the sector more broadly. The findings and reports from more than 50 programmes of RPS support have provided an important understanding of the challenges facing the sector and councils' responses; these reports have directly informed this stocktake. The findings from RPS are also used to shape the LGA's support to councils, including through its improvement offer.

### **Key themes**

The exact focus and scope of each Recovery and Renewal Panel or Bespoke RPS has been different – reflecting each council's aims, local context and the timing of the work. In particular, the relative balance given to crises response and recovery and renewal issues has differed. However, it is clear that councils have been managing these challenges concurrently and seeking to use the learning from their COVID-19 response work to inform recovery and renewal.

### ***Building on the achievements of councils' COVID-19 response***

The strong response of councils to the pandemic has been widely recognised. Many Panel sessions have started by reflecting upon the council's achievements to date in terms of its COVID-19 response. This has often included the following:

- Successful large-scale redeployment of staff to support the crises response
- Strengthened community relations and volunteering arrangements
- Improved relationships with strategic partners
- Effective delivery of national initiatives e.g. business grants, 'Everyone in' homelessness support
- Successful instigation of local schemes to complement and supplement national arrangements e.g. extension of national shielding arrangements, additional local welfare schemes, PPE procurement
- Delivering services in different ways e.g. online culture offer, greater use of technology to support vulnerable children and adults

A key focus of both Panel sessions and Bespoke RPS has been on how councils maintain and build on their achievements to date. For example, RPS work has explored:

- Accelerating a council's transformation agenda, including the effective use of technology, building on the success of response phase
- Further extending and deepening council relationships with local communities informed by working in different ways with, and alongside, residents over recent months
- Taking the learning from the governance changes necessitated by COVID-19 to support more agile decision making
- Rethinking the organisational capacity and skills needed informed by redeployment experiences, which exposed new skill sets and behaviours

### ***Planning for Recovery and Renewal***

Many council planning documents agreed in February and March 2020, including corporate and medium-term financial strategies, quickly became superseded by the impact of COVID-19. In response to the pandemic, some councils developed dedicated response and recovery plans. These have proved useful in providing a framework and common understanding of goals at a time of significant uncertainty.

A key focus of RPS discussions has been on how a council reflects the uncertain impacts of COVID-19 in its future strategic planning. Many councils are now in the process of developing new corporate and financial plans informed by, or aligned with, their initial response and recovery framework. While the sector wants to build on its COVID-19 response, councils also want to continue to address the underlying local issues that pre-dated, and in some cases have been exacerbated by, the pandemic.

It is important to note that a significant amount of RPS activity has also sought to address pre-existing challenges or issues where COVID-19 is part of the challenging context rather than the primary driver. The following examples give an indication of the breadth of Bespoke RPS to date:

- Council working arrangements in a new 'no overall control' environment
- Equality and diversity issues within a particular council department
- Governance and scrutiny arrangements
- Operation of a Licensing Board Sub-Committee and Licensing Sub-Committee
- Education, skills and employment support for young people

The uncertain nature of the pandemic, including changing levels of COVID-19 restrictions, has meant that councils have typically planned in an iterative and agile way. The need to frequently adapt to changing local circumstances meant that, for many councils, delivery of action plans agreed at a previous point in time was often not feasible nor desirable. Given the ongoing uncertainty, it is likely that many councils will continue with more adaptive and agile approaches. There may be learning and insights from the longer-term impact of the pandemic on councils' planning and programme management approaches, including emerging good practice which the LGA can share.

### ***Recovery and Renewal – the importance of sustainable funding and local flexibilities***

Remote Peer Support is focused on what councils can do to support their local areas and communities. However, as part of RPS work with councils, several challenges were identified where further national support or local flexibilities are required. Specific issues highlighted have included the rising demand for mental health support, the pressures on regulatory services, the viability of some third-party providers and the importance of infrastructure investment to support regional and local economic recovery.

The single biggest theme was the difficult financial position facing many councils – particularly in 2021/22 and beyond. The financial impact of COVID-19 on councils has been significant. In many cases, it has exacerbated the existing challenges of managing rising demand and reducing funding. Many councils have developed an in-year emergency budget whilst at the same time reviewing their medium-term financial strategy. RPS work has already explored financial challenges within councils and further finance focused RPS activity is scheduled with number of councils in 2020/21. The need for a longer-term and sustainable funding settlement for councils has been an underlying theme of RPS work.

### ***Identifying good and emerging practice***

The RPS process recognises the value in sharing experiences, learning and emerging plans for recovery and renewal. Positively, remote peers support work has already supported the identification of a range of good and emerging practice.

Several councils that have participated in RPS activity have already contributed examples to the LGA's [COVID-19 hub](#). These include:

- Barnsley's 'feels like home' ESOL group has continued to support residents virtually. There has been additional support on understanding the virus, how to socially distance and how the NHS works. In partnership with the Refugee Council, the group have created an emergency resource pack. This work has supported the group's members – many of whom are living in poverty, with limited social networks, and are already dealing with PTSD and other mental health difficulties.
- Barnsley's web-based services for local businesses. This has included webinars and free one to one support, as well as providing advice from regulatory services on safe working and public transport. The channel-shift to online business support has been very effective; the council plans to maintain and expand online delivery and is launching new offers to support and encourage digital innovation in the borough.
- Cheshire West and Chester's website's AI Chatbot (AiDA) has guided residents to the latest information and available support. Chatbot queries grew by nearly 600% on 24 March. As AiDA was able to cover simple queries, the council's contact team was able to be redirected to make outbound calls to 5,000 vulnerable and shielding residents. Crucially, the Chatbot also provides real time content updates from other trusted sources (such as GOV.UK) meaning that its COVID-19 advice remains accurate.
- Cheshire West and Chester's Inspire - an online space to share stories and support new community initiatives. The mix of contributions from residents and council staff reflect an equal partnership approach. Positively, the initiative has also raised the profile of the council's own engagement hub and increased the number of residents registering to use it.
- Dorset's work to support workforce wellbeing, which uses a coordinated, cross-partnership, approach. Delivery is based upon a preventative model that uses a wide range of tools to help staff to look after their own wellbeing. Importantly, additional emotional support and therapy services have been implemented to respond to colleagues' experiences of trauma and bereavement.
- Eastbourne's targeted approach to council tax collection. The council, together with Lewes DC, has introduced an ethical debt collection system, which uses data to identify residents who are struggling to pay their debts. The councils have been able to reduce incidents of tax avoidance while helping to connect vulnerable residents with support.
- Kent's Digital Video Carephone Service, which rolled out a digital support package to vulnerable and shielded individuals. This work has served to reduce isolation by supporting residents to engage with family members, friends or council staff – initial feedback has shown a rapid increase of quality interactions for participating residents.

- Lancaster’s COVID-safe awards for business to encourage compliance with changing government guidelines. The scheme both reassures local customers and supports a closer council relationship with local enterprises.
- South Staffordshire’s three-tiered working approach focuses on how different stakeholders (parish, district and county) are supporting local communities. The council’s work, including use of data and community mapping, enables the council to identify support gaps and provide targeted support.
- Telford and Wrekin’s work to support national volunteers week virtually. The council’s activity had a big impact (a reach of 1.2m on social media) with more than 1,400 hits to the volunteering web pages to find out more and sign-up to volunteer.

The good practice highlighted above primarily relates to councils’ COVID-19 response activity. Over time, it is recommended that further work is undertaken to identify emerging good practice in terms of recovery and renewal planning as well as the longer-term impacts from RPS – while recognising that some outcomes in these areas will not be clear for some time.

### **RPS: Impacts and learning from councils – Key points and recommendation**

- RPS is helping councils to maintain and build upon their strong COVID-19 response work
- Many councils are now developing new corporate and financial plans informed by, or aligned with, their initial response and recovery framework – however, iterative and adaptive planning approaches are likely to continue
- RPS work has highlighted the importance of sustainable national funding as well as local flexibilities in key areas
- Councils participating in RPS have provided a range of good and emerging practice which has been shared

#### **Recommendation 2:**

The LGA continue to share good practice and the impacts from Remote Peer Support.

## **6. Remote Peer Support – Impacts and learning from the process**

Remote Peer Support is underpinned by the existing principles of [sector led improvement](#) (SLI), including that councils are responsible for their own performance with the LGA having a key role in providing tools and support. The core methodology of RPS is similar to existing peer support, including corporate peer challenge. It is based upon peers reviewing documentation, considering a framework of key questions and exploring issues including through one-to-one and workshop discussions. Significantly, as with a CPC, the LGA can provide additional follow-up support and guidance to address identified challenges and recommendations, including through its wider improvement offer.

The overall framework of RPS, including the core themes and questions, are an adaption of the corporate peer challenge model – but with additions and revisions to prompt thinking about the impact and significance of COVID-19. This RPS approach was designed to ensure a strong focus on recognising the importance of pre-existing challenges as well as COVID-19 response, recovery and renewal issues. While it is important for councils to consider the learning from their COVID-19 response, in many respects, the core characteristics of an effective council are the same as they were before the pandemic e.g. clear prioritisation, robust financial planning, good governance and effective leadership. Within the overall

framework, the specific scope and questions used in RPS work have been bespoke – informed by the views of the participating council, peer team and the LGA. This approach has worked well – providing some structure and consistency across councils but also allowing work to be tailored to local needs.

The experience of RPS to date – including the chosen scope and focus of participating councils – provides a strong indication of councils' support needs. As highlighted above, remote peer support has been used to address a broad range of issues. However, it is also clear that many councils would welcome further support in relation to building financial resilience and supporting economic recovery. These issues should form a prominent part of the LGA's future SLI offer.

The need to deliver peer support work entirely remotely was a new challenge. However, the required technical changes (such as the use of Zoom, Teams and other platforms) and many of the related cultural adaptations were relatively straightforward as they broadly reflected changing practice within councils and the LGA. More generally, the RPS experience to date has highlighted advantages and challenges that will inform future remote peer support as well as corporate peer challenge work when onsite activity can recommence.

A key benefit of remote peer support is the advantages it can provide to participating peers. Virtual support work can be undertaken by peers without the need for travel – with peers being available to their own council when required while still supporting another authority. This has served to broaden the peer pool – including geographically and for those with caring responsibilities – particularly for shorter RPS work, where the requirements of travel and overnight stays would have been prohibitive.

Some Bespoke RPS has been structured around 3-4 days of consecutive support. This has the advantage of immersing both the peer team and council in the review activity – ensuring that there is a clear and dedicated focus. In some cases, this has been a challenging requirement for peers to meet given the existing pressures at their own councils.

Other Bespoke RPS has taken place less intensely over a longer period to support the timetable requirements of either the peers or the participating council. Some peers and LGA officers have found spreading 3-4 days activity over a longer period more beneficial to reflection and challenge than consecutive days. The space between peer activity has allowed the peer team to further reflect on what they have seen and heard and allowed more time for the LGA to triangulate key issues and identify relevant good practice. While this has typically worked well, understandably, some peers found managing both peer work and their day-to-day council responsibilities over a prolonged period more challenging.

It is proposed to continue to operate a flexible approach for the remainder of 2020/21 – with councils and peer teams determining the schedule of remote peer support on a case by case basis. However, it is also recommended that this issue is explored further with peers and councils. The experience of RPS to date indicates that there may be some benefits in terms of widening the peer pool and creating greater space for reflection and evidence gathering from peer support approaches that do not rely on 3-4 days of consecutive activity.

The time constraints on Recovery and Renewal Panels are particularly acute, centred around a workshop of just 2-3 hours. The need to make best use of this opportunity, and the time of participating peers and the council, has encouraged LGA Panel Managers and peer teams to make greater use of advance preparatory work. For example, a Recovery and Renewal Panel is typically preceded with a significant level of desk-based analysis, pre-survey conversations and peer team discussions. In addition, a number of specific tools and resources have been developed to support this work, including dedicated [LG Inform](#) Reports



and an LGA Pre-Panel Survey which asks questions about a council's COVID-19 response and recovery plans.

The benefits of this additional preparatory work are already clear and, alongside the advantages of remote working, provide new methods and learning for future activity. For example, there is currently limited opportunity for peer teams to engage with a council after a CPC has been completed – except potentially in a formal onsite follow-up review up to two years after the initial peer challenge. The success of Panels has demonstrated the potential for a peer team to hold an initial remote progress review within the first year following a CPC. In addition, future CPC teams may be able undertake some activities (including initial 1-1s and focus groups) online prior to visiting the council onsite.

### ***Recommencing Corporate Peer Challenge***

The learning from RPS highlighted above is positive, including the benefits of remote approaches which can be maintained and built on as part of the LGA's ongoing improvement offer. However, RPS provided since July 2020 has not sought to replicate the comprehensive scope, focus and in-depth analysis achieved as part of a Corporate Peer Challenge. This has been a deliberate decision: when the LGA first piloted a remote offer in July 2020, it was determined that onsite activity is a requirement of a CPC. Feedback from participating councils and peers has been very positive about remote peer support, but there are clearly mixed views about the potential for remote activity to replace onsite work.

*"[Remote work] is no substitute for being on site with the team and the client council but we have to do the best we can remotely to provide councils with support and this is the best alternative."*

*"Really good experience – almost better than doing it face to face."*

*"I think there is a lot of merit in using remote peer support as part of a blended offer in future. I would see remote engagement as a real value-added opportunity rather than replacing the traditional model."*

The LGA intends for onsite peer challenge to resume in 2021 and it is recommended that the requirement for an element of onsite activity for a Corporate Peer Challenge is maintained. Central to the value of a CPC is its ability to understand a council's culture – including through observing norms and behaviours – and it is crucial that face to face activity is required in order to support this. Onsite activity can also provide a further degree of assurance, including by triangulating key messages identified in documents and during online meetings.

### **RPS: Impacts and learning from the process – Key points and recommendations**

- Overall, the remote approach works very well – and this is reflected in high levels of satisfaction from both peers and participating councils
- There is learning from the successful experience of RPS to date including in the use technology, widening opportunities for peer participation and greater use of peer teams in follow-up activity
- There remains value in onsite activity within a Corporate Peer Challenge to better understand the culture of an organisation

#### **Recommendation 3:**

The LGA utilise the learning from the RPS experience to date to inform a more blended / hybrid (onsite and remote) Corporate Peer Challenge offer

#### Recommendation 4:

The LGA maintain its position that onsite activity is a requirement for a full Corporate Peer Challenge

#### **Conclusions and Next Steps**

Remote Peer Support has enabled councils to learn and support each other during a very challenging period. A significant number of councils have participated in RPS and the feedback from authorities has been very positive. In addition, participating peers bring valuable learning back to their own councils. The LGA RPS offer meets an improvement need that is not addressed by other providers.

In addition to providing improvement support, RPS has captured insights and learning from councils that are planning, adapting and working in new ways. The LGA has already identified a range of impacts and good practice and further work will be undertaken to capture and share learning from RPS with the sector.

The LGA will continue to deliver its RPS offer: there is a continuing appetite from councils for remote, peer-based, improvement support. In response to interest from the sector, the LGA will also shortly launch an additional RPS option – the Remote Corporate Health Check (RCHC). A RCHC is a framework for councils to focus on key corporate issues, such as priority setting, place leadership and financial planning. A RCHC provides more time and space than a Recovery and Renewal Panel to consider key corporate challenges and recovery issues.

The experience of delivering Remote Peer Support also provides broader learning for the LGA's improvement offer. For example, RPS work to date has highlighted the benefits of further support for councils to build financial resilience and support economic recovery as part of the LGA's SLI offer. The remote approach has worked well – and there have been additional benefits from working virtually, such as opening opportunities to a wider group of peers. Although it is felt that some level of face to face activity is required for a Corporate Peer Challenge, there are clear advantages from more blended (remote and onsite) approach when the LGA's CPC programme recommences in 2021.

#### **Contact**

Gary Hughes - Principal Adviser – National Peer Challenge Programme

E – [gary.hughes@local.gov.uk](mailto:gary.hughes@local.gov.uk) - Tel – 07771941337

Kevin Kewin – Programme Manager – National Peer Challenge Programme

E – [kevin.kewin@local.gov.uk](mailto:kevin.kewin@local.gov.uk) – Tel - 07770702061