



An independent review into Member behaviour within the City of London Corporation

November 2023

Introduction

The LGA was pleased to be invited into the City of London Corporation to undertake a review to assess Member/Member and Member/officer relationships and behaviours within the organisation. The review was not an inspection but rather part of a commitment to learning and improvement within the organisation in the context of its strong desire to ensure that the City of London Corporation is an inclusive and respectful place for people to undertake their work and other duties.

The review was independent of the Corporation to provide an objective assessment of the current situation and sought to identify things that are positive as well as provide suggestions of things that the Corporation might want to do to address any identified issues. I appreciated the honesty, professionalism and enthusiasm with which people engaged in the process and the support provided in the lead up to and

during the review.

The review was undertaken by Sarah Messenger, Local Government Association Consultant (Workforce) and previously Head of Workforce for the LGA.

Methodology

The review was largely conducted through conversations either in one to one interviews or focus groups held over several days in October 2023. Most of these were conducted remotely via Teams but I also visited Guildhall to conduct two focus groups in person. I spoke to senior managers, the Chief Commoner and twenty one other Members which enabled me to consider a range of views and perspectives.

In addition, Members were given an opportunity to email me confidentially to share their thoughts, experiences and suggestions relevant to the review and a small number chose to do that. I also conducted desk research of relevant policies and procedures including the Member Code of Conduct, the Member/Officer Charter and Member induction including the range of training offered to all Members.

The emphasis in my meetings was on having a structured, confidential and relaxed conversation where interviewees/focus group members could reflect and share their honest views about the issues under consideration as well as make suggestions for the way things might be done differently moving forward.

A review such as this can only reflect the views of those spoken to, but the findings are based on patterns that recurred throughout my conversations. They capture the points I heard repeatedly, giving confidence that they are a fair reflection of the feedback I heard. However, I am conscious that I only spoke to around 20% of Members so care needs to be taken in drawing any firm conclusions. It was unfortunate that some of the focus groups had a very small number of attendees, and some were cancelled because no-one had indicated they were able or would like to attend. Of course, Members are busy people and several have day jobs beyond their Corporation responsibilities so this is not intended as a criticism but I want to acknowledge that no firm assumptions can be made about a majority Member view when I spoke to only a small proportion of the elected representatives. However, I had rich conversations with those people I was fortunate to talk to and they provided me with sufficient perspective, insight, experience and suggestions to validate the conclusions I have drawn.

I am aware that there have been some formal complaints about Member behaviour over recent years. This review was not intended to re-examine these in detail although they have been helpful as examples of the behaviours I was asked to consider.

Context

The City of London Corporation has 125 elected members (100 Common Councillors and 25 Aldermen). The electorate is made up of a small number of residents and

workers of local businesses and, uniquely, for a local government organisation in the UK it is non-party political and therefore does not have the systems of whip and party discipline that are present in all other Local Authorities. The Corporation is a historic, traditional and hugely important institution not just within London but the UK economy as a whole. It is unlike any other public body in the UK with a sphere of activity and influence that transcends its geographical borders. Several Members have held very senior roles in a variety of professions including financial services and the law and have high levels of expertise in the matters they are responsible for. This context is important in understanding why things are done as they are in the Corporation and why the culture, and behaviours that underpin it, have evolved as they have.

As part of the review, I looked at the Member Code of Conduct, the Member/Officer Charter, induction for new Members and the role of the Chief Commoner in resolving differences between Members. All of these were considered through the lens of the Nolan Principles which make clear the standards expected of all of us who undertake public roles. The Member Code of Conduct and Member/Officer Charter are both clear, well-written documents that are consistent with what you would expect to find in any good Local Authority. The challenge is to ensure that they become more than simply words on a piece of paper and set standards and a tone that everyone understands and buys into. My sense from the conversations I had is that these documents are known about and are shared through the induction process but that there is insufficient discussion about what they mean in practice. Consequently, I feel there is more the Corporation could do to be explicit about what good looks like in terms of how Members interact with each other and with officers. I will return to this later in the report.

The Chief Commoner is a role elected by all Members once a year and is often held by a longer serving, respected Member of the Court. The incumbent has an important outward facing role, supporting the Lord Mayor and two Sheriffs but also has an inward facing role described to me as a mixture of Leader of the House, Chief Whip and Shop Steward. This seemed to me to be a good way of trying to capture the importance of the Chief Commoner role in encouraging positive relationships and behaviours, intervening appropriately when issues arise and seeking to resolve differences. How this is done and how well it is done is largely decided by the skills and appetite of the incumbent and there is an opportunity to continue to review the role of the Chief Commoner to clarify responsibilities in terms of behaviours and relationship management so there is an expectation on the role holder to drive excellent organisational standards and help to minimise recourse to formal routes for dealing with disagreements and complaints. The Corporation has already taken steps in this direction which is welcome.

What are the positives?

The main positives I heard are described below:

- Almost all the Members I spoke to describe the Corporation as friendly, welcoming and polite. Some Members said they had never experienced poor behaviour from other Members and even those that had, emphasised that generally people are helpful, respectful, and courteous in their dealings with each other. The Corporation has had a significant intake of new Members since 2017 and some of the newer Members that I spoke to were keen to highlight how friendly people had been since they were elected. Linked to this

is a feeling that some shared with me that the Court is now a more open and vibrant place both personally and professionally. There have been a number of changes to formal and informal governance arrangements over recent years and I was told this has enabled greater levels of engagement and a reduced ability of specific groups to unduly influence and control the work of the Corporation. My focus was not particularly on the intricacies of the Corporation's governance arrangements but it's important to acknowledge that a number of longer standing Members feel that things have improved.

- It was acknowledged that there had been significant improvements to the induction process over recent years. This includes the range of training available to Members alongside the structured induction sessions provided for all new Members. Some of the older traditions such as new Members not speaking at Court for their first year have fallen by the wayside and through the induction process and support from longer standing Members, most new Members I spoke to felt able to contribute immediately. Some felt that most of their support had come from other Members within their wards rather than the formal induction process but whatever the route, the general sense was of an organisation better able to welcome and integrate new people.
- One of the effects of the intake of new Members is the increased diversity within the organisation, particularly in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. This is a welcome development in terms of the benefits of diversity of thought, perspective and experience that difference brings. Nobody talked to me about serious issues with racism, sexism, bullying or harassment which was reassuring. However, I did hear of some comments made during exchanges

between Members that suggest outdated and potentially discriminatory attitudes especially with regards to gender, may linger amongst a few.

- It was clear from the people I spoke to that senior officers are held in high regard and recognised as assets for the organisation. Somebody described the Town Clerk/Chief Executive as ‘a remarkable human being’ and others talked of the respect they had for the knowledge, skills and experience that senior officers had. Others were equally complimentary about the wider workforce although I did hear of issues with the way some officers have been treated by Members that I will return to later.

What are the areas of concern?

A review such as this is usually most valuable for the insight and feedback provided on things that are concerning or that people would like to change. Whilst I heard of positive experiences from most of the people I spoke to, this was not universal and concerns or suggestions for improvements were articulated by those spoken to.

These are captured below:

- Whilst no-one suggested that there is a systemic problem with poor behaviour within the organisation, several people I spoke to said that there is a minority of Members who behave badly or unacceptably sometimes. The examples of poor behaviour included disparaging remarks, personal attacks, raised voices, eye rolling, whispering behind hands when others are speaking. In isolation, these examples can seem petty and puerile but cumulatively they are pervasive and can create an environment where both Members and officers

are concerned about speaking and feel uncomfortable. It strikes me that in a context where, as one interviewee put it, 'most Members are achingly nice' these instances of poor behaviour become magnified. There were mixed views about whether behaviour generally had worsened or improved over recent times but it is clear from my conversations that a problem persists with the behaviour of some Members. Most examples I heard related to Member to Member behaviour but some did tell me of times when Members behaved badly towards officers.

The impact of this is to stifle debate, inhibit robust and transparent decision making and to undermine the ability of all to contribute to the best of their ability. Some told me of the reluctance to speak in meetings and felt that the issues with poor behaviour were impacting negatively on the effectiveness of some meetings and the ability of the Corporation to carry out its business.

- The situation with poor behaviour is exacerbated by the unwillingness of some Members to challenge those who are behaving badly or unacceptably. Whilst some instances have been challenged, most Members acknowledged that individually and collectively they did not always challenge poor behaviour and when someone is brave enough to speak up, others don't always back them. This links to the point above about the fear of the repercussions of speaking out. A few felt that the Chairs of Committees have the primary responsibility to hold Members to account when they behave badly in meetings and this does not always happen. I am aware of activity on social media and on blogs and websites that is highly critical of the Corporation and some of the people that operate within it which can also be an inhibitor to 'putting your head above the parapet'.

- A number of interviewees highlighted the absence of a clearly defined, understood and collectively owned organisational culture. There is an absence of debate about what the culture is or should be and one person suggested the organisation lacked 'cultural competency'. Any successful organisation will have clear responsibilities, ambitions and achievements supported by a shared understanding of what 'good' looks like. This extends beyond just what the organisation does to how it does it. Some felt that there is a sense of 'them and us' either between Members or between some Members and officers which undermines the principle of shared, collaborative ownership of the institution, its responsibilities and relationships. In the absence of a defined and collectively owned organisational culture, people make their own decisions about what is and isn't acceptable re behaviour etc which leads to inconsistency and confusion. One person told me that it feels as if some Members do 'exactly as they please' and others suggested some Members behave as if the rules don't apply to them. I want to reemphasise that everyone I spoke to was clear that we are only talking about a small minority of Members when it comes to poor behaviour but enough for the impact of what they do to pervade the whole organisation.

The agreed organisational culture and standards of behaviour should extend to all activity undertaken on behalf of the Corporation including evening events such as banquets etc.

- A few people told me they felt the Members Code of Conduct had become 'weaponised' by some meaning that matters that could and should have been resolved informally end up in formal procedures. I did not explore this in more

detail in terms of specifics but I was struck by the eagerness to raise matters formally in some cases rather than seeking to talk through the problem and for apologies to be given where necessary.

- The issue of training for Members came up in several conversations. I am aware that there is a wide programme of training available to members and several people acknowledged this. However, it is not mandatory and take up can be patchy. Whilst it's not necessary for all training to be mandatory, if the organisation is serious about creating a shared organisational culture and standards of behaviour for all then it has a responsibility to ensure everyone understands what the organisation expects of them and what they can expect of the organisation. Training and induction are the best way of achieving this. One Member described joining a committee and not being greeted or welcomed by the Chair. This may have been an isolated incident but it's an example of the sort of behaviour that can create a sense that you don't belong or you don't matter. Most of the examples of poor behaviour I heard are happening in Committee meetings or in meetings of the Court and several people felt that the Chair of those meetings could and should have taken action to challenge the behaviour. This did not always happen and suggests a lack of clarity and/or accountability about the role and responsibilities of the Chair in such circumstances.
- There is a sense amongst some that the organisation should consider new ways of ensuring Members get to know each other better and have opportunities to engage with each other beyond formal meetings. The fact that more Members now have jobs alongside their Corporation responsibilities mean that not all are able to attend the lunches that accompany formal meetings or to join visits to different sites. Some longer standing Members felt

these opportunities to interact informally with each other had been a valuable ingredient in relationship building and that the organisation would benefit from implementing new initiatives to spend time together, taking into account the work lives and other responsibilities of Members.

- My conversations elicited a mixed picture regarding relationships between Members and officers. The vast majority of Members were very positive and complimentary about officers although some did acknowledge that they had occasionally seen officers treated badly by Members. For example, some felt that a small number of Members treated more junior officers as if they were 'servants' and they were aware that staff were afraid to raise their concerns for fear of the repercussions. On the other hand, a couple of Members felt that officers, particularly more senior ones, focused too much on meeting the needs of senior Members and could do more to build relationships across all Members.

Officers felt that most Members treated them well and were friendly, respectful and professional in their dealings with them. However, some have felt they have been treated badly by some Members creating at best an unpleasant environment to work in and at worst, a belief they have been bullied. The 'them and us' perceptions that I referred to earlier also extends to Member/officer relationships. I am aware that the 2021 Governance Review said that 'the Corporation has no sense of common endeavour' and some officers would like a stronger sense of the Corporation belonging to and being the responsibility of both Members and officers. The organisation is fortunate to have access to significant levels of officer and Member knowledge, skills and experience; the challenge is how to harness that in a shared endeavour to make the best decisions in the interests of residents, businesses and the

UK economy.

- Earlier, I described improvements in governance and ways of working that some feel have contributed to a much improved working environment both professionally and personally. However, some issues persist and these emerged in my conversations with Members. One theme raised by a number of Members was the number of individuals belonging to the Masonic lodge. Numbers had declined in recent years but appear to be on the rise again and some expressed concerns about the lack of transparency about which Members participate in the lodge, the proportion of lodge members who sit on key committees and the fact that women Members and members of staff are not represented within the lodge. I did not explore this further nor am I suggesting that membership of the lodge is, in itself, a problem but its existence and influence within the Corporation is a cause for concern for some Members and is therefore something that needs further discussion. The other issue that was raised more than once with me is the tendency for some questions/issues to be raised for the first time within Court rather than being properly addressed first through the Committee system. Some of this is seen as 'grandstanding' by those Members who do it and it can undermine the effective decision-making processes of both the Committees and the Court. Again, this needs to be explored further to draw any firm conclusions but certainly warrants debate within the Corporation.

Moving forward

I have acknowledged already that the majority of Members did not contribute to this review so care needs to be taken with drawing any firm conclusions at this stage.

However, there were patterns in what I heard from those who did contribute and they have been captured in the sections above. Perhaps the most useful contribution this report can make is to stimulate discussion and debate between Members and Members/officers about the feedback I have shared and options for addressing the concerns I have described. With that in mind, I offer the following suggestions of things the Corporation may wish to consider doing as part of an organisational responsibility to maintain and build on its many strengths but also to learn and improve moving forward.

1. The paper should be shared with all Members and senior officers with time set aside for constructive discussion and debate about its findings and suggestions for moving forward. It would be helpful for some of this discussion to take place with Members and officers together. The challenge is to agree what tone you want the organisation to set and how you want everyone to feel when they are undertaking their roles and responsibilities on behalf of the Corporation. I use the word 'feel' to represent the environment that the Corporation creates; do people feel respected, valued, integrated, inspired etc and therefore able to give their best?
2. I would strongly encourage the Corporation to consider what 'good' looks like in terms of behaviours, relationships and ways of working. In effect, I am suggesting the Code of Conduct and Member/Officer Charter are brought to life with examples of what they mean in practice. Some will feel this is patently obvious and therefore an exercise that has no value but I take a different view. In any organisation, the absence of a shared understanding of and commitment to a defined organisational culture and standards of behaviour

leaves individuals to make their own decisions about what is and isn't acceptable. Members and officers alike have a shared responsibility for both the effective working of the organisation and its reputation. To do that properly, there needs to be agreement about what that looks like in practice.

3. The Corporation should consider how it can reinforce its messaging about standards of behaviour and organisational culture in the induction process. This is the first and most important opportunity to inform Members about the environment they are entering, how they will be supported and respected in carrying out their role and responsibilities and what is expected of them in carrying out their democratic role. It should go beyond simply sharing relevant documentation and include clear messaging and discussion about what being a Member within the City of London Corporation means in terms of how you behave and conduct yourself.
4. It may be helpful to introduce a system of 'buddying' for new Members so that everyone has one on one access to someone who can help them settle in, answer questions and support them in navigating the complexities of the organisation. I am aware that this often happens informally and some people described the great support they'd had from other Members within their ward, but making such support available to all may be helpful.
5. I think the Corporation would benefit hugely from requiring all Chairs of Committees to undertake mandatory training in the roles and responsibilities of being a Chair. This would include all the elements of successful chairing of meetings and would include the responsibility to ensure that the business of

the Committee is conducted respectfully and professionally, with poor behaviour challenged and stopped. There should be mandatory refresher training for all Chairs every two years.

6. Steps have been taken in recent times to reinforce the role of the Chief Commoner in managing Member behaviour and relationships and this is welcome. It is early days but some people told me it was a good step in the right direction and will help in managing and reducing some of the issues that have arisen previously. It would be helpful for the Corporation to be clear about the measures of success for this revised role so that it can be confident that it is making the difference that was intended. For example, one would hope that there would be a reduction in formal complaints. Of course, the success of the Chief Commoner role will always rely to some extent on the skills, influence and reputation of the incumbent but monitoring of impact will provide organisational oversight of how well the role is being carried out.

7. It would be helpful to encourage a culture of 'allyship' when it comes to challenging instances of poor or unacceptable behaviour from some Members. This will be easier to do in a context where there has already been discussion and agreement about what 'good' looks like regarding organisational culture and behaviours. Allyship does not mean 'ganging up' on people but rather is a way of all Members demonstrating they understand their responsibility to challenge unacceptable behaviour and minimises the potential for such challenge to be left to a 'brave' few. Poor behaviour should always be judged by the effect on the recipient rather than the motivations or intentions of the person behaving badly. People will have different tolerance

levels for behaviour they may be on the receiving end of but all Members should feel a responsibility to step in when someone is clearly unhappy or upset by someone's behaviour or when they witness behaviour that they consider to be inappropriate or unacceptable.

Conclusion

I enjoyed meeting Members and officers within the Corporation and was impressed by the insightful contributions I heard or received via email. It is clear the organisation has undergone significant change over recent times which has largely been perceived to have brought benefits and improvements to the organisation. There is much for the Corporation to be proud of but challenges persist that this report has sought to highlight. I hope that the report is a stimulus to honest, respectful and collaborative debate that allows the Corporation to decide for itself what it would like to change and to agree on the reasons for doing so.