


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Brentwood Borough Council

14th December 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2021 and published the full report with an action plan in April 2022.

The progress review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately six months after the council published the CPC action plan, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations
- Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank Brentwood Borough Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This progress review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review at Brentwood Borough Council (BBC) took place remotely on 14th December 2022 having been postponed from earlier in the year.

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

- Brentwood/Rochford Partnership
- Member Development
- Promote the "Brentwood Way"

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

- Bill Cullen, Chief Executive Peer - Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council
- Cllr William Nunn, Member Peer - LGA Regional Peer, Breckland District Council

- Kirsty Human, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met virtually via MS Teams over the course of five hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Cllr Chris Hossack - Leader of the Council
- Jonathan Stephenson - Chief Executive
- Steve Summers - Strategic Director
- Emily Yule - Strategic Director
- Sarah Bennett - Director of Customer and Data Insight
- Greg Campbell - Director of Policy and Delivery
- Phil Drane - Director of Place
- Andrew Hunkin - Interim Director of People and Governance
- Julian Higson - Interim Director of Housing
- Claire Mayhew - Corporate Manager (Democratic Services) & Deputy Monitoring Officer
- Caroline Corrigan - Corporate Manager (Planning Development Management)
- Jonathan Quilter - Corporate Manager (Strategic Planning)
- Sam Wood - Corporate Manager (Finance)
- Laurie Edmonds - Corporate Manager (Economic Development)
- Kim Anderson - Corporate Manager (Communities, Leisure and Health)
- Jonathan Woodhams - Corporate Manager (Community Enforcement)
- Gavin Dennett - Corporate Manager (Environmental Health and Licensing (Thurrock))
- Leona Murray-Green - Corporate Manager (Customer Engagement)
- Nicola Marsh - Corporate Manager (Housing Estate)
- Nichola Mann - Corporate Manager (Human Resources)
- Angela Abbott - Corporate Manager (Housing Needs and Delivery)

3. Progress Review – Feedback

It was acknowledged by the council and peers that 2022 had been a challenging and poignant year for many reasons. The progress review was being held later than initially planned due to tragic unforeseen circumstances which had seen the death of three senior officers in the past six months. Despite these sad circumstances and the distress felt by officers and members, they had all pulled together and rallied to ensure the pace of delivery and services to residents were not impacted.

Since the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in November 2021, the interim joint chief executive arrangements with Rochford District Council (RDC) had become permanent and the top three tiers of management were now being shared across the two councils. This had involved a restructure of the top team, external recruitment and implementation of an equal pay policy.

It was evident to peers, the council had used the CPC as a catalyst for change and improvement, moving the council forward. Overall, there has been good progress on the recommendations with seven of the ten making good progress without issues, two requiring more attention and just one needing intervention.

Recommendation 1 - Build your capacity to deliver your ambitions – there is insufficient resilience in the system to deliver all the councils’ aspirations	
Recommendation 2 - Prioritise on your key projects – Focus on delivering a smaller number of key projects at pace and within the capacity available to avoid undue pressure	
Recommendation 3 - Invest in success – Develop a new workforce strategy, align pay, refresh and implement corporate learning and development.	
Recommendation 4 - Grow your political leaders – Develop and empower councillors to efficiently succession plan.	
Recommendation 5 - Develop a more diverse budget strategy – Expand the focus to include efficiencies through transformation, partnership working and future opportunities	
Recommendation 6 - Rationalise the investment structure – Review the interrelation of Brentwood Development Partnership (BDP), Seven Arches	

Investments Limited (SAIL) and BBC.	
Recommendation 7 - Promote the “Brentwood way” - The culture of BBC is the councils unique selling point to continue to grow and develop maximise externally.	
Recommendation 8 - Have a plan for partnerships – review existing arrangements to ensure they are still value for money and meeting the council’s objectives	
Recommendation 9 - Consider wider opportunities – Other partners and stakeholders want to work with you to help deliver services.	
Recommendation 10 - Demonstrate good standards in public office – Councillors can also demonstrate and adopt the “Brentwood way”.	

3.1. The Brentwood/Rochford Partnership

There has been rapid progress on moving forward with the partnership and growing the new senior team despite the significant personnel challenges faced. The top three tiers of management are in place and a single pay structure has been implemented. Service reviews are now being scoped for opportunities to align processes and procedures. The use of change champions (who have received dedicated training) to work with managers on these reviews was an idea inspired by RDC and enables a more collaborative approach as opposed to being “done to.” Officers carrying out these roles, do so in addition to the day job. The Peer Team heard that capacity to maintain business as usual whilst undertaking service reviews was a challenge. It is therefore essential they are given assistance with time management, prioritisation support and understanding from managers and members.

The one team - two councils’ approach is still in its infancy. Recruitment to senior posts resulted in the appointment of more BBC staff than RDC (only one member of corporate leadership team (CLT) from RDC). This we were reassured was on merit. This has caused sensitivity and there is a feeling amongst some staff/members in Rochford of a BBC takeover, which is certainly not the case. The reality is that senior managers are spending a larger proportion of their time in RDC as they get to know the staff, members, processes and procedures in order to develop synergies and

work towards the goal of 80% harmonisation - to deliver the efficiencies expected.

Communication and engagement with staff has been vital to the partnership. Staff briefings have taken place, away days with teams from both councils, informal discussions between services about combining efforts and progress on bringing RDC into a modern shared working environment at Freight House. This long-anticipated move for RDC will enable more creative and collaborative culture to develop and thrive, strengthening the one team aspirations.

Progress is being made in some areas, for example, in economic development where the services have come together to deliver better opportunities across both places. The HR function is also now working across the partnership to align practices following the single pay structure. Officers also highlighted the joint work around community services and the cost-of-living campaign developed across the one team with each council's website mirroring the other and a focused working group across both councils and partners. These provide good outcomes for residents, businesses and staff and is building resilience across the two councils.

Recruitment is an issue for all councils and BBC is no exception. There is however an opportunity afforded by the partnership to attract brightest and best. The shared management arrangements create attractive prospects and can offer enhanced salaries, responsibilities and experience. Peers encourage the partnership to exploit this in their marketing of vacancies, be clear about the prospects the one team creates and the benefits it brings.

The partnership has also enabled BBC and RDC to become a bigger voice across South Essex. Both leaders taking commanding roles in the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) and the chief executive leading on the housing workstream. This is a great example of what the districts can do - lead in regeneration, place and housing. Using this subregional leverage there are opportunities to use this voice to promote the benefits of joint working and explore other opportunities.

3.2. Member Development

There was a recognition from officers that member behaviour across all groups is getting worse – unfair and aggressive towards officers. An element of this can be

attributed to the upcoming elections in May 2023 but it is having an impact on staff morale and needs to be controlled. Group leaders need the knowledge, expertise and support to manage their groups, get views and opinions heard without making personal insults. The new monitoring officer and chief executive are working together to address behaviour but need the support of group leaders to embed this.

The leader has taken forward member development for lead councillors, but this needs to be widened across all members and parties. There is an offer of support from the LGA to facilitate this and to provide member peer mentors where required to support lead members in their roles.

Despite the political differences and questionable behaviour, members do come together to drive forward the councils' ambitions. There has been full council support for BBC's growth and investment projects with the adoption of a new Local Plan, strategic housing developments, purchase of Childerditch industrial park, the refurbishment of the Bay Tree Centre, and the implementation of £8m leisure programme. This is positive for the residents, businesses and stakeholders of Brentwood.

Peers encourage BBC to explore more opportunities for cross party and cross council working. It was understood that there is the potential to do this through establishment of a member development group to oversee all member training and development across BBC and RDC. There is also the opportunity for members to work together on the preparation of the joint corporate plan next year. Creating time and space for BBC members and BBC/RDC members to come together over specific topics, issues and the partnership, will help strengthen relationships, drive a focus on what needs to be achieved and support member ownership. Providing all member briefings on matters relating the partnership will also free up capacity within the officer teams.

Although progress has been made on rationalising priorities, there was evidence from the conversations peers had with officers, that there are still high expectations of delivery and changing priorities need further management across the officer and member leadership. There was also uncertainty over the resourcing of priorities and whether BBC can financially deliver on ambitions. Continuing the monthly dialogue with members on the budget, borrowing limits and commercial activity will help to

focus minds and is essential to maintain oversight and governance and avoid over exposure to risk.

The biggest concern raised throughout all conversations was that of political instability post May 2023. Both RDC and BBC have elections and both leaders' seats are to be decided. Given the national mood, there is the possibility of changes within groups too. The impact of this on the partnership is a concern, but something that can be addressed through mitigation. Peers felt there needed to be more promotion of the benefits and outcomes the partnership is delivering. The financial savings, resource collaborations, service improvements, culture change and so on. Ensuring all members are fully aware of the benefits and how these align with the budgets of both councils should help to promote its sustainability.

3.3. Promoting the “Brentwood Way”

There is no doubt the “family” at BBC has really pulled together to support colleagues in the wake of significant personnel issues and their impacts. Peers could still see a strong sense of the Brentwood way and this was demonstrated by the continued strength in the organisation with the newly appointed and dedicated CLT, and the Extended Leadership Team (ELT) who continue to exude positivity, deliver under pressure and support each other. Peers heard ELT refer to themselves as “the jam between operations and senior management.”

As the restructure of the top tiers has taken place, the ELT at BBC has provided a stability in the council for operational staff that hasn't been available to those at RDC given the different organisational structure. It was clear to peers; this difference has really benefited BBC staff in terms of how they perceive the partnership and their roles within it. Many officers commented that RDC staff have greater uncertainty as a result of missing this tier of management.

It is hard to define the Brentwood way but peers felt it described a culture of work which revolved around supporting each other to deliver at pace, pulling together through adversity, delivering more with less and genuinely caring for each other. As a result, there are many hats to wear, lots of decisions to make and very little time for reflection which many referred to as “exhausting.” Accessibility to CLT was seen as more challenging since they took on joint roles. In these early days it may require more empowerment of ELT until the partnership settles into a rhythm and more

service integration has taken place. It was recognised that other than HR, ELT are not yet working across the one team so find it difficult to understand the difference in demands and challenges this brings. Peers encourage CLT to bring ELT into the conversations and create the waterfall effect to ensure the enthusiasm of this group is not lost in the transformation.

Peers heard a lot about culture and the difference in culture between RDC and BBC. Coming together there is an opportunity to develop a new culture which harnesses the best of both councils' different cultures. There has already been learning from each other, for example the change champions and many services have begun conversations about how they can work together, for example, IT, procurement, elections and planning. The next task will be identifying new joint processes and procedures which bring about efficiency, change and improvements in services. The change champions and service reviews will be key to engaging all staff in this process, listening to all views and developing a culture which delivers the objectives of the one team.

3.4. Considerations

Having listened and spoken with officers and members, peers reflected on the areas that would most help BBC as they continue their improvement journey.

- Continue to engage members, promote development opportunities and take up peer support from the LGA for each political group. It is essential for pace and delivery across Brentwood and Rochford.
- Explore opportunities for cross party joint member working groups across the councils. This will provide opportunities for relationships to develop across groups and councils and will help with knowledge and understanding of priorities and challenges.
- Ensure all members are fully informed of the partnership achievements so far. Use every opportunity – meetings, conversations, blogs, reports and so on to constantly reiterate the successes and create a positive narrative.
- Exploit recruitment and retention opportunities through the partnership to attract the brightest and best to your new and exciting one team arrangements.
- Continue to develop and sustain the one team employee voice group to ensure all

officers across both councils feel their voices are heard and listened to.

- Develop a way of working which harnesses the best of both councils' different cultures and ways of working. The Brentwood way isn't always the only way and there is much to learn from each other (for example change champions.)
- Continue to develop a joint communications plan, answering the "so what" question at every opportunity. The partnership is a benefit to both councils – reference the examples.
- Take time to be reflective and celebrate your success. Don't let the pace of delivery detract from recognising how far you have come and where you want to be. If you want to be an exemplar for the future of local government, document your journey.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Brentwood Borough Council for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

We will provide details of member development opportunities alongside the offer of mentoring to assist with succession planning.

As part of the shared chief executives network the council has access to peers in similar joint council arrangements. Further opportunities to learn, share, collaborate and promote best practice with peers in the network will continue to be explored.

Rachel Litherland (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA)

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