

# Corporate Peer Challenge

Brentwood Borough Council's Strategic  
Partnership

8<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Agreement of scope of peer challenge



## Scope and focus

The Peer Challenge will use the five high-level themes we have adopted for all LGA Corporate Peer Challenges with a partnership focus for the initial framework. Underpinning the LGA's CPC framework the peer team will use the aims and ambitions from the [strategic partnerships memorandum of understanding](#), as prompts to enable an independent evaluation of the partnership's success.

The peer team will work positively and constructively to challenge individuals and groups in an effort to help the councils and partnership improve. They will follow the evidence and triangulate what they read and hear to come to a set of conclusions which they will shape into recommendations to support ongoing improvement.

**1. Local priorities and outcomes: Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Are the councils delivering effectively on their priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all their communities? How clear is the Partnership's ambition and how widely is this understood and shared? How well is this working so far? Are the Councils...**

- Working collectively to overcome challenges and maximise opportunities.
- A partnership that retains 'local identity' for residents and has the scale to make tangible investments and improvements for the wellbeing of communities.
- Overseeing a well-resourced and fully integrated, council officer team delivering for both councils with built-in resilience, focussed on improving front-line services and effective back-office functions.
- Recognised as a partnership that applies sector best practice and delivers best value for money services that positively impact on their respective geographies.
- Delivering on their top five strategic objectives for the Partnership:
  - Delivering financially sustainable, high-quality services that are valued by our community.
  - Leading the way to improve our environment by acting locally, contributing globally.
  - Providing high quality, sustainable housing to meet the needs of our community.
  - Improving the quality of life, health and wellbeing of our residents.
  - Creating opportunities for economic growth and improved connectivity in which businesses can flourish.

**2. Organisational and place leadership: Do the councils provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities? Does the Partnership supplement or confuse effective local leadership? Are the Councils...**

- Acting with a stronger voice to exert more influence on a regional and national level in order to ensure that the councils thrive in a changing local government sector.
- Creating a reputation that gives other councils and organisations the confidence to do business with the partnership and generate income.
- Progressing beyond shared management and shared services and being strategic in intent.
- Seeking to harmonise the partnership approach wherever possible (but ultimately each council will be able to set its own policy for which services are to be delivered and how e.g. tourism and economy at Rochford).
- Continuing to set their own corporate plans, using a common template and simple language, seeking wherever possible to harmonise ambition, portfolios, and functions whilst avoiding duplication of resource.

**3. Governance and culture: Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny? Are the Councils...**

- An enduring partnership between two sovereign councils, with a unified officer team that delivers high quality outcomes for our communities, operating a one culture ethos.
- Using their collective skills to promote investment in their communities through developing a culture which is proactive, innovative and which focusses on growth and opportunity.
- Supporting the creation of new unified organisational teams with one culture through a single senior management team, driving efficiency through organisational development and seeking to align internal operational structures and services wherever possible.

**4. Financial planning and management: Do the councils have a clear understanding of their current financial position? Do the councils have a strategy and a clear plan to address financial challenges? Are the Councils...**

- Securing greater financial sustainability for both councils, individually and together.
- Working together to be more entrepreneurial and ambitious.
- Achieving efficiencies, improved purchasing power and economies of scale.
- An equitable partnership that brings financial sustainability and organisational

resilience to both councils while balancing risk.

- Wherever possible, harmonising or jointly commissioning grant aid and other funding bids (not inhibiting the ability of either council to independently commission grant aid such they wish to).
- Subjecting new initiatives, including those involving significant investment, commercial risk and arm's length delivery vehicles, to a robust business case and identification and management of risks.

**5. Capacity for improvement: Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve? Are the Councils...**

- Building more resilience into both councils.
- Retaining and developing the talented staff across the councils.
- Demonstrating a greater combined capacity to manage change and strive for continuous improvement.
- Delivering a people first partnership recognising that its strength comes from the talents people bring through a depth of skills & experience developed further through collaboration and creativity.

## Timing and duration

A peer challenge takes around 6 months lead-in time, including time required to secure time in peers' diaries. We discussed a duration of 4-5 days onsite commencing on 4<sup>th</sup> March and finishing on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

## Corporate Peer Challenge team

The LGA will source and agree a team of officer and member peers informed by the skills and experience required. There is also the opportunity to include peers from outside of local government, such as team member(s) with a community sector, central government or private sector experience. The LGA is committed to diversity and inclusion and it is important that peer teams reflect the diversity of local councils and the communities they serve.

We would suggest a peer team of:

- An Independent Leader peer, ideally a Leader with experience of working in a

strategic partnership arrangement. We will work with you and the Political Group Office to identify a potential councillor peer.

- A Liberal Democrat Leader peer and a Labour peer, ideally these would be Leaders with experience of working in a strategic partnership arrangement.
- A Chief Executive Officer peer, probably from a council of the same tier and ideally reflecting an area with similar contexts and experience of leading two or more councils.
- A senior officer peer, with a strong track record on financial, risk, governance and audit management of strategic partnerships.
- A senior officer peer possibly with a strong track record on corporate transformation and culture change.
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Kirsty Human
- LGA Project Support Officer – Onyekachi Abajingin

## Process

The peer team will meet with a range of officers and members over the course of the peer challenge, as well as a range of external stakeholders. There will be informal feedback to the Leader and CEO at the end of each day.

On the final day the peer team will deliver headline feedback and recommendations to a selected audience which should include as a minimum: the corporate leadership team, senior members and, as appropriate, opposition members. During this feedback there is opportunity for clarification and questions.

This will be followed by a report detailing the strengths and weaknesses of the partnership, the issues considered, areas for further improvement and key recommendations. The council will receive the draft report within 3 weeks of the CPC. We will then agree the final report with you for publication. The council should then develop a detailed action plan that responds to the report's findings.

In addition, to get the most out of the onsite CPC activity some preparatory and post-

CPC engagement will be beneficial.

## Peer preparation and engagement

To help the peer team gain an in-depth understanding of the local issues before their onsite activity, we will work with you to develop an Information & Data Pack. The most important aspect of the pack is the 'Position Statement' prepared by the council. This provides a clear brief and steer to the peer team on the local context and what the peer team should focus on. It is an opportunity to set out the key issues, challenges and current thinking in relation to the CPC.

The peer team will also undertake some pre-onsite conversations with key officers and members. We will confirm the dates and times for this earlier engagement, which will typically take place remotely.

## Progress Review

At least 12 months after the CPC, Brentwood Borough Council are required to have a Progress Review and to have published the findings from this review. This will be a facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.


Following the Progress Review, the LGA will produce a short report which reflects the council's progress and provides examples of any good or innovative practice.

The date for the Progress Review will be no later than December 2024.

## Publication of corporate peer challenge report

To promote openness and transparency and share learning across the sector, the corporate peer challenge offer is made on the expectation that the council will publish both the CPC report and its subsequent action plan in response to the peer challenge's findings.

We expect the council to publish their CPC report within three months of the CPC taking place, with the subsequent action plan published within five months of the



CPC taking place. We do ask that the council commit to this principle at the outset. The LGA will require a copy of the action plan and will publish the CPC report on its website.

## Practical arrangements and next steps

The council will need to identify a peer challenge co-ordinator who will act as a day-to-day contact and oversee the practical arrangements. I understand **NAME IF KNOWN** will undertake this.

The council will need to prepare a timetable of meetings and focus groups for the team. The attached Preparation Guidance Note provides further details on preparing for the process, including the timetable. Kirsty Human would be happy to meet with **NAME** to discuss the practical arrangements.