

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Basildon Borough Council

**17 & 18November (virtual) 24 & 25 November (onsite)**

Feedback report

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1. Executive summary

Basildon Borough Council (BBC) has big ambitions and a huge passion for its community. This was evident when speaking to staff, members and stakeholders. The council has achieved some impressive work during the last 18 months and has been able to adapt well to the challenges posed by Covid.

The council has undertaken a lot of data analysis and as a result knows and understands its communities well. There are further opportunities to build on this and enhance the council’s place leadership with joint visibility from the chief executive and leader at meetings with stakeholders and the development of a simple but strong and effective narrative for the place that can be shared and bought into by partners and stakeholders.

Since May 2021 the new leadership of the council has focussed on bringing more stability to the council and the benefits of this can be felt and appreciated. Four political changes in five years have left some staff, members and stakeholders uncertain about projects, ways of working and delivery of priorities. The Council has adopted a new Corporate Plan setting out its priorities. Now that a new way of working is being established it is essential that the council ensure that they are focussed, manageable and part of the new narrative. Managing expectations around timescales of delivery is essential and will reassure staff and members and ensure that residents and businesses understand when and where they will expect to see changes and development in their communities. Without this there is a risk of an uncoordinated and unsustainable approach that will not deliver as effectively for residents as otherwise might be the case.

Partnership working has been a strength of the council over the past couple of years. It is seen as effective at relationships, which are driving positive results for the community. The council is known as a key partner of ASELA (Association of South Essex Local Authorities) who are driving housing, infrastructure and economic growth across the sub region. The council has also forged good partnership working with the County Council, Health partners and the Police although there is still some way to go to deepen some of these relationships. The challenge for this council is to consider and articulate what it will lead on delivering, what it will influence and what it will work in partnership on. The Corporate Plan seeks to identify this but further work is required to bring further clarity and focus and ensure it is understood by staff and members.

Despite the changing landscape felt by staff in the past four years, many described working at the council as being part of a big family. The loyalty and dedication of staff was clear to see and something that should continue to be nurtured and protected by the senior leadership team.

Staff have really appreciated the step change in internal communications but feel that this has not been embedded across the organisation. Further consideration needs to be given to consistency of and how messages are cascaded down the organisation to ensure all staff are aware and engaged with what is going on.

The legacy of previous issues and associated ways of working and poor behaviour was felt to be a heavy presence on the workforce and members and is hindering the focus on the future. For Basildon Borough Council to achieve its ambitions and to deliver its priorities it needs to acknowledge what has happened, draw a line in the sand and concentrate on what needs to be delivered now in a supportive and empowering working environment. This will be fundamental to the council’s future success.

The changes to the governance structure are another opportunity to bring a positive change for the council. The cabinet model being reintroduced should enable more streamlined decision making and is a chance to revisit and create a more robust scrutiny process that will need to be embedded into the culture of the council. Work needs to start now to ensure a smooth transition in May after the elections and the council should seek support for this process.

The Local Plan must be adopted in early 2022 for the council to move forward and deliver on its ambitions. Adoption of the plan is integral for the council to be viewed as a serious player both in the region and at shaping the success of the future growth agenda for Basildon. Senior Members must make this one of their top priorities for the first part of 2022 and appropriate resources be allocated to support the process.

The peer team believe that the council needs to develop a financially stable Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) that does not rely on the use of reserves or assumptions around projects but that a more thorough and test based approach should be applied. Ownership and understanding of the budget by members and staff needs to be strengthened. The peer team felt that some officers and Members did not understand or own their budget and that this resided with just key officers and members. There needs to be collective ownership and understanding going forward.

Basildon Borough Council also asked the peer team to look at regeneration and planning for their town centres. Exciting and ambitious plans have been drawn up with partners but a coordinated approach to growth is lacking. The council need to tie all their plans in one plan or strategy and create a simple and clear narrative for the council’s vision on regeneration, skills and growth.

Basildon knows and understand itself well, it embraced the Peer Challenge process openly and inclusively with a clear ambition to become the best authority it can be to meet the future challenges facing the community and residents.

1. Key recommendations

There are several observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team’s key recommendations to the council:

1. **Develop a compelling narrative for the future of Basildon.** Something that is simple and memorable for staff, members, residents and stakeholders.
2. **Continue to build a culture of respect between members and officers and continue to address poor behaviour when it occurs.** This is an essential part of shredding old ways of working and behaviours. Moving forward this will be essential
3. **Seek early support for transition to Cabinet and consider a shadow Cabinet from early 2022.**  The LGA will be able to support you with this process.
4. **The Council prepare a longer term view and corporate projects need to be prioritised and aligned to ensure that they are delivered within current resources without impacting on core business activity.** There is a real risk that the council will not be able to deliver on all its projects unless a prioritisation exercise is carried out and appropriate resources are aligned.
5. **Have a robust approach to managing change across the organisation driven by SLT, supported by MGM, led by senior members and supported by strong project management.** This needs to be embedded within the organisation to enable staff and members to understand what is happening when and why.
6. **Consideration of ‘A Growth Strategy for Basildon’ or ‘Basildon Growth Plan’, which is a single narrative for growth, employment and skills, regeneration and connectivity would enable the council to capture and prioritise regional and localised ambitions.**
7. Summary of the peer challenge approach
   1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

* + Bev Smith, CEX North West Leicestershire Council
  + Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of Breckland Council
  + Cllr Michael Payne, Deputy Leader of Gedling Borough Council
  + Clive Mason, Director of Finance and Assets, Harborough Council
  + Richard McGuckin, Director of Town Centre Investment, Stockton on Tees Borough Council
  + Ami Beeton, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA
  + Simisola Rasheed, Project Support Officer, LGA
  1. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils’ performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council’s priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on Regeneration and Planning and your plans for the Town Centre

* 1. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days virtually and two days onsite at Basildon Borough Council, during which they:

* Gathered information and views from more than 35 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
* Spoke to more than 110 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team’s findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

1. Feedback
   1. Local priorities and outcomes

Basildon Borough Council is one of twelve district, borough and city councils in Essex and comprises the five main settlements of Basildon, Billericay, Wickford, Laindon and Pitsea. The borough has a population of 187,500 and has seen a population increase of 3.6% since 2008. The 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation ranked Basildon borough as 111th most deprived of 317 English local authority areas, yet the 2021 UK Prosperity Index ranked Basildon borough as 139th most prosperous of 379 UK local authority areas thus illustrating the differences felt and lived by people across the borough.

The Council is best placed to and does have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the needs of the area and plays a clear and strong role in communicating and advocating for these interests. Under the new administration the council has been clear about its desire to renew its estates and working in partnership to address the crime and disorder in the borough. The peer team found that the Council has used data on occasions to inform decision making based on community need and hard to reach groups with ‘hyper local work’ based on the micro analysis of services to specific communities.

The Corporate Plan in place for 2021- 2024 has been underpinned by intelligence and data analysis and in which the council now needs to use its two years through Covid-19 and the extra data received as its core evidence. The peer team found evidence that it was known and bought into by most senior and middle managers as well as members. However, consideration should be given about how Members can use data more efficiently. Further work was needed to fully embed the plan within the organisation. With 49 deliverables there was some nervousness from staff on how they would be able to deliver all the plan’s objectives with limited resources and capacity as well as deliver business as usual work.

An honest and frank conversation is needed between SLT and senior members on what is achievable within the plan lifespan, existing resources and then over what further timeframes. If this is not articulated clearly there is a risk to the council’s reputation and a perception that the council have been unable to deliver. Communication on this should be cascaded to all staff so that they fully understand their contribution, the clear prioritisation and timescales and indications of what within the plan is business as usual. The peer team felt that this would provide reassurance on the volume of delivery and the immediate priorities vs the medium and longer term deliverables. If SLT and Members can’t articulate the council’s priorities, then the community won’t be able to either.

The new corporate plan has been received positively by the County council. The synergies between the borough and the county plans were acknowledged and seen as a positive step for system wide delivery for Basildon and an example of place leadership. The foundations have been laid on for this relationship and a continued investment in time from both sides is needed. To supplement this further the chief executive organised and hosted a strategic leadership day for the two senior management teams to share challenges and opportunities for the borough.

Irrespective of the changes back and forth in political leadership, the members of the council recognise the need to have a longer term plan to deliver for Basildon. As mentioned above realistic timescales and prioritisation would help manage expectations of residents, businesses and stakeholders and the council shouldn’t be afraid of saying no or not now to things. The council is not able to deliver all projects for all wards of the council at the same time. Clear articulation of plans supported by a simple narrative of the vision for Basildon would help the administration to explain and manage expectations around delivery to residents. This type of work shouldn’t be a surprise as it should be cross referenced to the ruling groups manifesto pledges.

Use of social and alternative media had been used to engage residents on regeneration and priorities. This is still in its infancy but has foundations to build on and could fit within an overarching communications strategy that will help to deliver the council’s narrative.

BBC managed an effective and efficient response to COVID whilst maintaining delivery of services across the borough and learnt a lot about themselves in doing so. Staff commitment and collaborative working helped this to happen. As well as delivering vital services to residents, businesses and ensuring the most vulnerable were protected and safe, the council also redesigned its customer service and reception area for a post covid front face for the council and digitalised its files. The council is asked to consider revisiting its Customer Services Policy which is not due to be revised until 2024 in the light of recent development and changes in practice and customer expectations due to the pandemic.

The team spoke to representatives of tenants and leaseholders who raised some issues about their engagement with the council and at times a lack of response and communication regarding some key issues. Acknowledging that the past 18 months would have had an impact the peer team felt that the council should consider a review of its tenant communication processes to ensure that all tenants, especially the “hard-to-reach” know about how things happening in their areas. In respect of planned/programmed development, location based communications are given to tenants to kept them informed of progress and that a repair tracking process is introduced for reactive repairs.

The council has refreshed its inclusion and diversity policy and there was seen to be good engagement through the Basildon Community Diversity Council which acts as a community scrutiny panel for the council’s policies, practices and service provision.

There is a climate change policy in place for the council who are aiming to be Carbon neutral by 2030 as an organisation and contributing to the national policy of carbon neutral by 2050. This policy needs to be understood and owned across the council and embedded into the culture and values.

* 1. Organisational and place leadership

The leader and chief executive have a positive and respectful relationship which has benefitted the organisation and has started to encourage a more open, respectful and positive culture for staff and members as well as shared understanding. The leader was willing to ask for support from the chief executive if needed. The peer team found that the leader had managed to reset relationships with the County Council which had been well received and viewed as a positive step. This relationship and the parallel of the chief executive had led to synergies and joint working which was positive in aiding delivery of Basildon’s priorities/agenda. It was evident that the leader knew what good looked like to him and what he wanted to see from the council’s delivery of the corporate plan and he was articulating this to members and senior officers.

The leader has a good understanding of place including the different challenges faced by residents and businesses. The work that he had led in the community with the ‘*meet the leader’* events had been well received along with his video blogs. It was reported to the peer team that he had good visibility with some communities in the borough.

The chief executive was described to the peer teams as collegiate and open with extraordinary resilience. The peer team heard great examples of leadership given during the Covid response and with his role on ASELA where he is the lead for skills and the technical university. The peer team also heard that he was viewed as a willing collaborator who was adept at working in uncertainty and bringing partners to the table when the outcome and direction was unclear.

The value that the chief executive brought to partnerships was clear. He was reported to be a strong partner and have good visibility with businesses, partners and the community which was positive. The peer team found evidence of strong and trusted partnerships with health, where a multi-agency vehicle delivered health and wellbeing, businesses, ASELA and other local government partners. To build on this further the chief executive and leader should ensure a coordinated approach to cement visibility for the leader with external stakeholders.

BBC has been one of the seven members of ASELA since 2018. An idea born from the leaders in South Essex to work more collaboratively around delivering the housing targets for the area - with initially little influence. In 2021 the councils formed a joint committee which led to more accountability and transparency with published meeting agendas and minutes and a place at the table for Opportunity South Essex. Partners recognised the vital role that the chief executive has played in being the lead for skills and the technical university and the longest serving member of the group. Councillors and officers were keen to point out to peers that this has been a challenging process with changes of leaders due to elections and changes to the officer leadership. Fortunately, the partners could all see the benefits of working together at scale and momentum has continued. ASELA is now not just about building houses and has ambitions for infrastructure, the economy and place shaping in South Essex. It has enabled the smaller districts to punch above their weight and provides a platform to engage with national government. Over £11m has so far been levered in from government for the five pioneer programmes: superfast digital connectivity, Thames Freeport, SEEPARK (South Essex Estuary Park), Infrastructure and housing and South Essex Technical University.

ASELA has created a compelling case for a trailblazing strategic place-based partnership with Homes England. Now agreed in principle, by the Homes England Executive Board, it will be just one of two such partnerships in the country. This work will require all partners to share resources to enable delivery – a hugely multi-layered and multifaceted project that has caught the attention of government ministers who are in conversations with the partners about what they can invest in the partnership to be part of the delivery.

All partners agreed that ASELA is a strategic partnership that can deliver at a scale and pace across South Essex unachievable to each of them singularly – the power is in the collective. It was also clear this model of partnership working could be replicated elsewhere and should be promoted outside of Essex.

The staff at Basildon Borough Council came across as both passionate and committed to the council and place, this passion was also shared by members and partners who are keen to work together to deliver the best services to residents and businesses. The strong leadership in place through the pandemic had left staff feeling supported and confident and it was clear that there had been and still was effective and innovative communication to staff from both the chief executive and leader which meant that staff felt informed and engaged with what was going on. An example of this was the videos that were made for staff. It was evident that there had been wholesale change in the communications team and that the new Head of Communications bought experience, energy and passion. The peer team learned that the communications team were embedded in strategic meetings and had regular engagement with the leader. There is some further work to do in terms of wider visibility of SLT and the consistency of key messages (priorities/activities) that cascaded down the organisation from key meetings.

Staff did raise concerns regarding the frequent changes in political administration that had occurred and how this had created a feeling of instability that they were concerned would continue due to the council process of having elections by thirds. This concern was causing some hesitancy amongst officers and members who were concerned about being able to implement priorities in a short time frame or developing ideas and policies that would be dismissed by a potential new administration. Elections by thirds is not unusual and is the preferred approach to elections by the administration. The council needs to move on from this concern and accept that this is the environment that they work in. Having a narrative for the place alongside the corporate plan will provide stability to staff to deliver the objectives of the council.

The council has a workforce strategy in place that supports the transformation plan. A number of staff said that they appreciated the move away from annual appraisals to regular 1-1s and valued the investment that had been made in learning & development. The move to agile and new ways of working had largely been well received by staff but more work was needed to bring members fully onto that journey and create the right alignment and ensuring that Members are comfortable with service delivery and KPIs on performance.

One thing that is vital for the council to succeed in delivering in future years is the adoption of the local plan. Without this the council will find it difficult to shape the growth and resources needed to deliver on its priorities. The council needs to work together to make sure that every effort where possible is put into getting the plan over the line and making sure that resources and capacity are aligned appropriately. This is a key part of the jigsaw for future vision and partnership working for the council.

* 1. Governance and culture

The council have agreed to work to move back to a Cabinet model from May 2022 although this remains subject to a required further formal resolution. The peer team saw this as a real opportunity to strengthen governance and scrutiny within the organisation and use the constitutional changes to enhance the decision making process. Whilst the council have previously operated under this model and a number of senior officers and members have experience of this system there is still some preparation to do before a switch in May e.g. agreeing what fit for purpose looks like, how the council becomes more agile with the right delegations and setting up a shadow Cabinet. The first few months of 2022 will be crucial in getting some of the groundwork for the above finalised. The LGA have offered to support both officers and members of with this process.

The current governance arrangements had allowed for some pre decision scrutiny and it was reported that policy development input was welcomed by the leader but it did feel at times that scrutiny was an add on rather than culturally embedded into the organisation. There was some challenge for the council to ensure that scrutiny was aiding the decision making process and making sure that its role within the new structure was seen as positive, and beneficial for the council, would be key.

Through many discussions whilst on site it was evident to the peer team that the new leader has brought a reassuring focus to the authority and longer term planning. This in turn has bought a sense of optimism for both staff and members. The new governance model with the new corporate plan and the new organisational strategy and hopeful adoption of the local plan will give the council a really strong foundation to deliver for residents and customers. Performance management had been seen as weak but the new performance management system provides the dashboard for key performance indicators. The new system will allow staff to see the golden thread from the Corporate plan, through Service Plans, and down to individual responsibilities. The peer team noted that some staff were pleased that annual appraisals had been replaced by more regular one-one conversations. The peer team felt that this new approach would provide an opportunity for good and transparent governance in due course but that this should need to be monitored and reviewed.

The stability and focus that the leader has brought has also resulted in better member and officer relationships. The peer team heard examples of serious poor behaviour in the past. This had resulted in tension and confusion over key priorities and deliverables and created a blame culture. The impact of this past behaviour and associated ways of working was still having a significant impact on some staff and in turn their capacity. For the council to move on positively the legacy issues needed to be acknowledged and a line drawn in the sand. If the council is not able to move on then it will continue to be distracted and diverted away from its future focus and the plans that are in place to deliver the priorities of the council.

The peer team recommend that the Council continues to build and maintain effective member and officer relationships and continues to address behaviour that is seen to be unacceptable. The peer team felt that regular training for all members would serve as a timely reminder for individuals’ behaviour, responsibilities and personal checks and balances. Members are the champions of civility in public life and should set the correct standards for the community of Basildon.

Whilst there was still some way to go in terms of prioritisation and clearer articulation of timescales, the new culture was showing some signs of a more conducive and positive working environment. The good relationships and communication at a senior level had provided an opportunity to reset relationships and build trust and respect which was trickling down the organisation and this should be built on. The calling out of poor behaviour and setting a new tone for the organisation would support this.

The positive work around that the council led due to Covid has led to confident remote working and an agile hybrid approach that will be retained for the future which would include innovation and shared working spaces. The peer team were impressed with the work that had taken place during the pandemic to achieve this. Officers now need to ensure Members are part of this process and that Members can still have the same suitable access to Officers to undertake their role. Online networks and support was developed and the regular pulse surveys reported that 78% of respondents felt that their mental health and wellbeing is taken seriously by the council. Officers also felt trusted and supported by senior officers and members to work remotely with 90% of the respondents to staff survey in October stating this.

The cultural audit has been progressed which is helping with developing new values and behaviours for the organisation. The council needs to build on the outcome of the audit to shape messages and improve staff engagement. Staff engagement had been deemed as improving by staff. They concluded that there had been greater transparency from SLT through regular messages but also the whole staff events. Clearer and more consistent messaging was still needed as mentioned earlier in the report but the peer team were reassured that this was understood by the council and being planned for. The peer team also found evidence of an inclusive approach to design/ change processes within the organisation. One thing missing was the opportunity for staff to share learning and best practice across the organisation. Some staff were keen for this to be facilitated in a more formal way rather than them discovering examples by chance. Building a learning culture would support staff to feel more empowered to try new things and not be afraid to fail. It would provide more opportunities for cross organisational working and also encourage staff to look outside of the organisation to share their stories as well as find new examples to test back in the council.

* 1. Financial planning and management

The peer team found evidence of the council having a relatively traditional and strong budget setting and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) planning process which includes members in its development - budget principles are discussed in July; a series of briefings take place in the autumn and the financial position is discussed at Chairmen’s briefings. The formal process starts with SLT discussions in the summer and Member budget reports in November. Whilst this is positive there were some concerns raised around ownership of the budget and financial understanding with some senior members not fully knowing the council’s financial position when asked. For the council to have good financial planning and management it was essential that both members and officers understood and owned their part in this rather than it being owned by just the senior finance leads. Members should have a broader knowledge of the budget to ensure common messaging and understand and appreciate the financial impacts of the decisions that they make. Officers need to be able to support members in this process.

Work is being carried out to tie together the MTFS and Corporate Plan to clearly demonstrate the golden thread with key political priorities which will support ownership and understanding. However there is a lack of clarity around some of the larger projects e.g. Climate Change, Regeneration and the Safe & Sound Programme which feel open ended. Consideration needs to be given to how this could be tightened, monitored and managed more tightly.

The peer team understood that members received half yearly budget monitoring reports. The team felt that this was on the light side with usual practice being quarterly with forecast outturns to establish evolving trends and recommend that the council review their practice to ensure more rigorous monitoring takes place going forward. Moving to a Cabinet System in May 2022 should allow quarterly reporting at Cabinet meetings and that Budget planning with Cabinet Members should commence in June/July each year for that long lead in time to December.

The council has a substantial budget gap for next year of circa £1.7 million, which will increase to more than £8million by 2030. Significant work is needed to deliver financial sustainability. This is currently being addressed by assumptions for an updated settlement, investments, savings and risks and opportunities of large projects. The peer team felt that further evidenced work needed to be carried out to test the assumptions that have been made alongside a programme of transformation. This view was supported by Internal Audit who felt that the process for achieving savings could be more robust and set against budget codes/areas of activity.

The council has had a policy to freeze Council Tax which has introduced a structural loss into the council’s finances of circa £750k; considering the ongoing budget gap the peer team felt that the prioritisation of this policy approach may want to be reviewed to understand the implications if it was to continue. The thinking being that it could become a significant issue as government policy assumes that councils will maximise council tax for income purposes

The peer team heard that good independent discussions have taken place between members and the external auditor. The external audit had not raised any issue with the accounts and 2020/2021value for money review, they had also reviewed financial sustainability and commerciality and no issues had been reported.

The Council has developed a significant commercial investment property portfolio but the commercialisation agenda is now broadening to review key customer centric services to deliver service efficiency and maximise returns for the tax-payer. The peer team felt that a prudent approach has been taken and with the changes in investment regulation that alternative sources of investment could be sought (property funds, multi-asset funds etc; some of which can be flexed to include ESG investments). In addition a programme of cost review could be undertaken, such as a Zero Based review of services.

Line by line review of fees and charges needs to be undertaken to ensure where possible full cost recovery is undertaken. Likewise, the council is strongly encouraged to consider charging for Garden waste as currently you have those individuals in apartments/flats and scoping out route optimisation for waste services.

* 1. Capacity for improvement

As previously noted, Basildon Borough Council has committed and passionate staff who have a sense of optimism for the future of the council and what can be delivered for residents. The peer team recognised that there is a stable and experienced leadership team with a willingness to embrace change. This has been demonstrated through the development of the organisational strategy which has been put in place to align skills and priorities and provide a good methodology for process improvement. As mentioned earlier there was a feeling amongst some services that capacity and resources did not match the ambition of the council and they would still struggle to meet their targets. Further urgent work was being progressed to strengthen project / programme management with the intention of prioritising projects, articulating clear timescales and aligning appropriate resources so that officers, members and partners understand that whilst not everything is planned to be delivered in the short term, there will be the right capacity and resources in place to deliver over the medium and longer term.

There is so much going on at the council, as well as an ambitious corporate plan and growth agenda the council is also undergoing a lot of internal changes with new ways of working, transformation programme, change in governance and a new performance management programme. It is vital that the council takes some time to think about what is achievable and that capacity, the right communication and resources are regularly considered and revisited to ensure that appropriate resources and skills are in place. There is a real risk that staff become overwhelmed, burnt out or feel not engaged with the number of changes and projects that are currently planned. The CEX must ensure that resources remains focused on the council’s priorities and activities.

The council has strong partnerships in place to support system wide delivery. In terms of capacity the peer team felt that council could be clearer on their responsibilities and roles of some of the delivery projects for example - what the council was facilitating, influencing and leading. This would reassure stakeholders that not all the key priorities were to be delivered and resourced solely by the council.

The improving member and officer relationships will allow for energy and capacity to be focussed on the delivery of services and projects rather than staff and members time being caught up in disputes, misunderstandings and complaints.

The council’s workforce strategy is looking to address some of the issues that have been raised in its workforce profile which include the following key points.

* To develop an inclusive leadership & management development programme tailored for the needs of the council.
* To Identify and close any pay gaps by undertaking ethnicity, disability, gender and LGBTQi+ pay gap surveys and report on this in our workforce profile.
* To build a workforce representative of our community and monitor our progress towards this annually.

The council have committed to working towards achieving the above which will help to make the organisation fit for the future.

57% of the current workforce at BBC reside in the borough but like most local authorities, Basildon faces recruitment and retention issues. The work that has been started on the councils branding and offers needs to be continued. Basildon has a number of exciting opportunities and projects to deliver and selling the potential of the place as part of the recruitment campaign will hopefully draw in applicants.

The council’s workforce is ageing (over 60% are aged 41 or older) and it recognises the need to grow its own talent. The council currently provides a Graduate scheme, Apprenticeship / Higher Apprenticeship scheme to encourage young people to work within the Local Government Sector. It also has good examples of a ‘grow your own’ culture in those professions that are hard to recruit to across the country e.g. planning and environmental health. This is creating local jobs and supporting talent within the organisation.

The 2019 staff survey provided a clear message to the senior leadership team around the lack of career progression and opportunities felt by staff. This is something that has been picked up and will be addressed through the workforce strategy. A further staff survey is now due although the peer team noted that regular ‘pulse’ staff surveys were carried out during the peak of the pandemic.

COVID has facilitated a ‘One Team, One Council’ approach across the council and staff have enjoyed the challenge and opportunities that this has bought. They are keen to continue this approach which has increased knowledge, appreciation and resilience across the organisation. A more formal process for sharing best practice could be introduced where departments learn from and share with each other. This could then also be extended to outside of the council and out of the region to share but also learn about different ways of working and good practice. Basildon has a good story to tell but would also benefit from connecting with other councils that could help them with modernising specific services e.g. route optimisation.

The ambition of the council, the pandemic and the past issues that the council has dealt with in terms of changing political administration has left less strategic thinking time than has been needed. This is not to say that it hasn’t happened but it would be beneficial to the council to formalise and build in regular ‘thinking time’ to increase strategic capacity to plan, reflect and be prepared for any future challenges rather than having a more reactive response.

The council should consider developing a corporate landlord model to increase efficiency and ensure that the asset management plan reflects the human resources that are available.

A lot of work is currently being planned and the peer team felt that a robust approach to managing change across the organisation needs to be driven by SLT, supported by MGM and led by senior members before buy in was possible. This needs to be underpinned by a strong project management culture to ensure consistency and manage risks. The organisational strategy that is in place is multi-faceted encompassing – service design, IT strategy and the workforce strategy. To manage this change effectively and maintain performance, appropriate resources and process need to be in place alongside leadership development for leaders and managers implementing the changes and leading the strategies.

**Regeneration & Planning and your plans for your town centres**

BBC asked the peer team to look at Regeneration and Planning including the plans for their town centres as a part of the peer challenge. The council demonstrated a very ambitious agenda for growth and is determined to revitalise areas of the borough and maximise opportunities to improve residents’ lives. There are currently several plans and partnerships that BBC have in place to help them do this. The technical university is held in high regard by partners and there is clear evidence of the Council’s delivery of regeneration projects, such as the cinema, with a healthy ambition to build on these with an extensive pipeline of ideas.

The peer team recommended that these plans and ideas be co-ordinated to develop either a viable ‘Growth Strategy for Basildon’ or a ‘Basildon Growth Plan’. This would provide a single narrative for growth, employment and skills, regeneration and connectivity which would strengthen the council’ position when talking to partners and stakeholders and cement political buy in. Having a co-ordinated approach would allow the council to capture and prioritise regional and localised ambitions and be able to articulate these in a simple and clear way. This would need to link to the emerging Local Plan, Economic Development Strategy, Regeneration Strategies for the 5 towns, Cultural Strategy and Sempra Delivery Plan.

Once a co-ordinated narrative and plan have been drawn up the council needs to consider next steps. Whilst the growth and regeneration ambitions are strong there is a need for prioritisation and the development of a pipeline of interventions to manage delivery and expectations and improve long term accountability. Additional capacity needs to be built into the plans for the council to realise and deliver its ambitions on regeneration otherwise it is at risk of falling short and not delivering. The peer team ask the council to consider looking at capacity when consolidating existing projects into a growth plan or strategy and co-ordinating the narrative around this.

The peer team recommend embedding a corporate model for project management and delivery across all placed based programmes. This would increase consistency and capacity when needed on management of delivery.

There is good evidence within the council of partnership working with both developers and local business to achieve wider growth objectives. The council are a seen as a trusted partner in this process.

As a key member of ASELA, there are indications of strong regional and sub regional partnership working from Basildon with clear evidence of leverage into Basildon as a result. As mentioned previously over £11m has so far been levered into the partnership arrangement of ASELA which Basildon benefited from. ASELA has produced a Growth Prospectus which Basildon’s Growth Strategy or Growth Plan can be aligned too. This would demonstrate the council’s ambition not only for the borough but for its role on a sub-regional and regional platform.

There is a clear focus on addressing housing need and the council is using its direct control and influence well to achieve this through joint working and seeing the bigger picture across the sub-region.

The Local Plan is progressing but further strengthening of the evidence base should be continued to ensure a robust examination in public. Appropriate resources and capacity need to be aligned to this process to help get it over the line, however, it is recognised timescales are tight. Members agree that the plan needs to be completed but there is potentially some urgent work to do to consolidate buy in and their confidence in the process.

1. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council’s senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Gary Hughes Principal Adviser for East of England, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Gary Hughes and Ami Beeton are available to discuss any further support the council requires. [gary.hughes@local.gov.uk](mailto:gary.hughes@local.gov.uk) and [ami.beeton@local.gov.uk](mailto:ami.beeton@local.gov.uk).