


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Basildon Council

7 September 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2021 (17 & 18 and 24 & 25) and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

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 Basildon Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month 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 Basildon Council took place onsite on 7th September.

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

- **Change to Cabinet form of Governance**
- **Culture Change**
- **Growth Strategy**

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

- Bev Smith, LGA Associate

- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of Breckland
- Richard McGuckin, Executive Director Place, Liverpool City Combined Authority
- Ami Beeton, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The peer team met with the following representatives from Basildon Council over the course of their time onsite at the council.

- Councillor Andrew Baggott - Leader of the Council
- Scott Logan - Chief Executive
- Mandie Skeat - Deputy Chief Executive
- Paul Burkinshaw - Director of Corporate Strategy & Governance
- Owen Sparks – Director of Resources
- Lesley O'Shea – Director of Housing & Property
- Tomasz Kozlowski – Director of Growth
- Paul Brace – Director of Community & Environment
- Louise Evans - Programme Assurance Manager
- Councillor Kevin Blake, Deputy Leader
- Councillor Terri Sargent
- Councillor Andrew Schrader (by phone)
- Councillor Anthony Hedley
- Councillor Don Morris
- Councillor Stuart Terson
- Councillor Jeff Henry

3. Progress Review – Feedback

Overall Reflections

In preparation for the progress review, the Council provided peers with a short position statement serving as a bridge to reconnect peers with recent context and activity, including a RAG rated status of some of the recommendations with summary progress.

It was recognised by both the council and the peer team the environment that

councils were operating in had changed since the CPC. It was clear that the council were mindful of current challenges e.g. cost of living and rising inflation as well as changes in national government.

It was clear that the council had an enhanced credibility and standing within the county and sub region space. Relationships with key stakeholders had developed and dynamics had shifted at both an officer and leader level. This was a positive for the council and their role and influence.

The council explained that they had taken on board the recommendations and findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge and recognised areas of focus and improvement. This was apparent from the conversations that the peer team had within the follow up sessions, hearing what had been put in place and what was still to come. An example of this is the work and commitment that has been undertaken by the council to work with the LGA to develop a narrative for the borough. This has helped provide consistent messaging when communicating with residents, partners and their workforce.

The peer team welcomed the news that the council has looked at its processes to managing change, including revitalising the Heads of Service network. The feedback from this forum was really positive, they demonstrated understanding of current challenges the council was facing and felt empowered to start developing solutions and sharing these upwards. This will be picked up further under the culture change section below. Other examples include the development and pilot of a change management framework and the establishment of a Programme Assurance Office.

One of the key recommendations in the report was about prioritisation. Whilst some work is underway to work on this, the peer team felt that this need to be seen as an urgent issue. The view of the peer team was that officers do not have a clear steer on the key proprieties for the organisation and in light of the current cost of living crisis and elections in 2024, difficult conversations and key decisions needed to be had this calendar year to ensure adequate time was planned for communication and planning.

Change to Cabinet Form of Governance

The council had planned previously to move from a committee system to a Cabinet model. The peer team heard from all the stakeholders that they spoke to that there had been a smooth transition to the new system, which comprised of a Cabinet and four scrutiny committees based on the council's corporate plan themes -

- People
- Place
- Prosperity
- Fit for purpose organisation

The new Cabinet system was based on a 6 week cycle which incorporated 1-1 meetings between the chief executive and leader every 2 weeks, informal cabinet meetings, briefings with Cabinet members and Scrutiny Chairs and Cabinet meetings. Whilst it was seen as early days as only one full cycle has taken place, staff and members felt that the new governance system had strengthened collective leadership of the organisation.

There was evidence of good collaboration and engagement at a strategic level. The peer team reflected that future challenges will test the new collaboration and strategic approach and members and officers needed to be mindful not to slip back to an individual or ward level discussions and focus where appropriate on the place as a whole.

The new system was being supported by training offered to officers and members on the new system, working in a political environment and member and officer relationships. The council advised the peer team that they had adopted the LGA Model Code of Conduct following a recommendation by its Joint Standards Committee in April. Training has been delivered on the LGA Model Code as well as

behaviours more widely.

The leader was clear in his support for the new governance structure and ensuring that members felt included and engaged. The peer team heard about the support that had been put in place for the new roles of Scrutiny Chairs and Cabinet. This would be essential in ensuring that scrutiny would be able to constructively challenge and felt empowered to do this.

Culture Change

As referenced above both members and officer relations have improved since the peer challenge through the change in the governance cycle and support, continued training opportunities and through a focus on shared values and improved ways of working agreed at a joint away day by Senior Leadership Team, Cabinet and Scrutiny Chairs.

The council explained that values and behaviours were now better understood between officers and members and relationships had improved. Officers were keen to develop relationships with Cabinet members and were now more confident about meeting with them. If behaviour that didn't accord with the agreed values and behaviours had been witnessed, it was dealt with immediately with both officers and members prepared to call it out. Officers also reported being more confident to get on with the job in hand and roles were becoming clearer and more defined. There was a sense of optimism about ways of working. There had been a move away from information only reports to Cabinet with a focus on decision making. Scrutiny Committees will receive information reports.

Since the CPC the Heads of Service network had been established it has been building collective ownership. Representatives from the network described feeling valued by members and the senior leadership team. The team heard that

communication and engagement with the network continues to mature and show innovation. There was also support for leadership development within the organisation with staff organising a Leadership conference. ‘Grow your own’ initiatives were being followed where possible and the council gave the examples of their recent qualified solicitor.

It was clear that the group understood the budget challenges ahead and had set up both an efficiencies working group and a cost of living working group. The peer team felt that prioritisation was still a key issue for the organisation and both Heads of Service and the Senior Leadership team would welcome a steer from members on this especially in light of the challenges that they would be facing in the coming months and setting the budget for 23/24. This was a key recommendation in the CPC report and is still the main focus for the council now. Prioritisation will provide clarity for staff, customers, stakeholders and residents and enable the council to focus on delivering essentials in a difficult climate – it can’t do everything at once.

Growth Strategy

The council had asked the peer team to include the Growth Strategy as one of its themes. The peer team reflected that the council had the key components in place but that a draft strategy that sets out the vision and an elevator pitch was needed. The acceleration of a vision and narrative was important. Once in place it could be socialised with members and key stakeholders and would help the council to tell its story and broader ambitions across the borough as leader of place.

An adopted Local Plan was a key part of this and is critical to achieving the right growth needs of the borough. Whilst the adoption of the local plan is a statutory process it was still possible to integrate this into the growth strategy and talk about the ambitions for the borough.

It is clear that the council makes a leading contribution to the wider South Essex agenda – not least ASELA. The council needs to continue to build on this at a borough wide level as well as a South Essex level.

However the peer team want to bring focus back to the process of adopting the Local Plan and recognising that the process is recommencing, the growth narrative will be critical in socialising and obtaining buy in to a collective narrative for Basildon that will support the Local Plan adoption process.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Basildon 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.

Gary Hughes (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and his e-mail address is gary.hughes@local.gov.uk