

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Bracknell Forest Council

8th September 2022

Feedback



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1. Introduction

Bracknell Forest Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 17-18 and 23-24 November 2021 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

This 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 Bracknell Forest Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This 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 Bracknell Forest Council took place in-person on Thursday 8th September 2022. The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

2.1. Recommendation 1

Stability has brought success and it is now important to recognise and plan for the next five to ten years.

2.2. Recommendation 2

When the time is right, Members will need to carefully consider what style of future

officer leadership they would like to employ to take the Council forward.

2.3. Recommendation 3

A clear vision for how the Council works in the future is required.

2.4. Recommendation 4

As you move to living with Covid consider how to continue to review the COVID data to guide your ways of working, protecting your workforce and service delivery.

2.5. Recommendation 5

Consider whether the Council could do more to meet the needs of vulnerable residents and communities and continue to build on the approach with the Voluntary and Community Sector.

2.6. Recommendation 6

Assure yourselves that the Council is customer centric, especially as you have moved to significant levels of virtual working. The peer team had a sense that Covid has distanced the Council somewhat from direct customer interaction.

2.7. Recommendation 7

Ensure your economic renewal plans are informed by risk assessments given the uncertainty of Covid recovery and Brexit.

2.8. Recommendation 8

Considerations – governance: In the experience of the peer team, many authorities continued decision making during Covid without the need for extended delegations. So in this context is their continued use still proportionate?

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

- **Lorraine O'Donnell**, Chief Executive, Cheshire East Council
- **Councillor Alan Jarrett**, Leader of Medway Council
- **Sarah Reed**, Executive Director of Corporate Services, West

Northamptonshire Council

- **Marcus Coulson**, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

The peer team met at the Council Headquarters in Bracknell over the course of three hours with the following representatives from the Council. The meeting was in two parts titled Leadership, Stability and Council Culture and Covid recovery and future developments which address the peer team’s recommendations listed above.

Progressing *Leadership, Stability and Council Culture*

- Paul Bettison, Leader (and chair of the Appointment Committee)
- Tim Wheadon, Chief Executive
- Paul Young, Assistant Director: Human Resources and Organisational Development

Progressing *Covid recovery and future developments*

- Andrew Hunter, Executive Director: Place, Planning & Regeneration (including Public Health)
- Abby Thomas, Assistant Director: Chief Executive’s Office (including business change)
- Kellie Williams, Assistant Director: Strategic Projects

Chief Executive Tim Wheadon and Leader Councillor Paul Bettison welcomed back the peer team and talked through the current topics of conversation:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Return to office• Leadership appointment• Ukraine Resettlement• Children’s Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thriving Communities• Town Centre• Strategic Priorities
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3. Progress Review – Feedback

After a fruitful and interesting conversation with colleagues at Bracknell Forest the peer team met to offer some thoughts and comment which are outlined below for

your consideration:

Peer Team feedback:

1. Bracknell Forest is a successful Council. There has been stable leadership who are willing to learn and innovate and who take reasonable risks based on clear evidence. Staff are happy to work there and speak well of each other and the Council's leadership team. Partners are equally positive, seeing Bracknell Forest as a good partner they can do business with.
2. There is a strong track record of successful service delivery over many years. Many areas of the business demonstrate good, and sometimes outstanding service delivery.
3. The Children's Services Ofsted Inspection that took place in June 2022 achieved the Outstanding category. It focused on the impact of leaders and the experience and progress of children in need of help and those of care leavers. A quote from the report states that "there is a positive and dynamic culture across the service, with a strong focus on support and challenge", for which the staff and those who lead the Directorate are rightly proud. This is a significant achievement.
4. Throughout the Peer Team's engagement with Bracknell Forest for the full Corporate Peer Challenge and this revisit there has been a clear desire to be as self-aware as possible in as many areas as possible. This iterative behaviour has enabled the Council to ensure it is aware of, and address, the following issues:
 - With regards to supporting those with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) there was a Joint Inspection of SEND services between 29 November 2021 and 3 December 2021 by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) which looked across the Council and Clinical Commissioning Group. This affirmed the need for improvements in areas such as co-production, availability of in-borough provisions, and timely mental health support. A written Statement of Action was developed and accepted the first time it was presented, and the Council then established a number of working groups and additional resource to support the improvement work.
 - The recovery work for the Town Centre post covid had the intentions of reactivation, engagement and development. In this the Council has United

Kingdom Shared Prosperity Funding of £1m up to March 2025 which is a pan Berkshire and Local Economic Partnership collaboration focusing on high growth and start up business support, a cultural strategy and a skills and training hub with voluntary transport, town centre retail and civil enforcement aspects. There is also a Levelling Up Round two bid submitted with the outcome known in Autumn 2022 to improve the mixed use of retail and the leisure quarter and also to help create a new library and culture space in the town centre.

- A grant has been secured from the Better Care Fund to deliver a three year 'Thriving Communities' programme with the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector (VCFS). With a focus on a preventative, strengths-based approach to maximise health, wellbeing, self-care and independence. This is to be achieved through community engagement and developing community groups and activities. The programme will also develop skills and competence across the local health and social care system to improve use of community co-production and design. This further develops partnership working with health and the VCFS and builds on the increased neighbourliness and volunteering during the pandemic.

5. In line with the above Bracknell Forest is seeking to address common issues that are being experienced by the whole local government sector, which are:

- Addressing the arrival of refugees from the Ukrainian War and elsewhere. The Council welcomed its first Ukrainian guests on 31st March 2022 and there have been a continued increase in arrivals. In response there is a cross Council programme of support working closely with the VCFS including supporting the development of a Ukrainian community group with a town centre community hub opening in The Lexicon. Several community engagement events have been held to support the settled Ukrainian community, new arrivals and hosts. There are long term challenges around housing and there is an upcoming six month review point and increasing requests for rematch or alternative accommodation.
- The growing gap in the cost of living that is present and predicted to increase in the immediate and near term future will need to be addressed.

- Bracknell Forest recruited a new Chief Executive having undertaken a detailed review of options in January 2022 that agreed to no immediate structural change and appointed a direct replacement to develop and evolve the existing culture. Susan Halliwell was appointed to join from 3rd October 2022. Detailed transition and handover arrangements are underway.
- Dealing with the reorganisation of the Integrated Care System and the structural and personnel changes that have occurred.
- Seeking to address the crisis in Care due to a lack of funds and a rise in demand that includes social care transformation and charging reforms and workforce challenges.

6. Specific issues for the Council:

- How to manage the public messages up to next local election.
- Ensuring that the new Chief Executive builds on the positive culture and practices at Bracknell Forest for the benefit of all.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Bracknell Forest 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.

Mona Sehgal, LGA Principal Adviser – South East (Berkshire, East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and Surrey), is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Mona is available to discuss any further support the council requires through her email address: mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk