

To: **The Executive**
15 March 2022

Peer Challenge Report and Action Plan **Chief Executive**

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To outline the key findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge visit that took place in November 2021
- 1.2 To present the actions proposed to address the recommendations made by the peer team to support the council's continued growth.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 **To publish the peer challenge report (Appendix A) on the website.**
- 2.2 **To endorse and publish the action plan as set out in Appendix B.**

3 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 Peer challenges are coordinated by the Local Government Association on behalf of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). They are an opportunity for robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils. Challenge brings together political and managerial leadership from other councils to review the objectives, actions and achievements of the subject council and to provide recommendations for future growth and development. Therefore, the recommendations in this report aim to maximise the learning from the findings of the peer team.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 None considered.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 In November 2021, a team made up of five peers visited Bracknell Forest to undertake a peer challenge. During the visit they explored how the council operates, focusing on five themes, as recommended by the LGA:

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 and achieving improved outcomes for all of its communities?

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 respect, 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 clear 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?

- 5.2 During the four-day visit, the team gathered information and views from more than 36 meetings, in addition to further research and reading. They spoke to more than 52 people including a range of council staff and Members and important external stakeholders and partners.
- 5.3 A wide range of documents were prepared and shared with the peer team prior to their visit.

Key Findings

- 5.4 Overall the review team found many strengths in the council's approach. This included Councillors having a clear focus on good services, effective managerial leadership and positive relationships between Members and Officers. The team also reflected on major achievements such as the successful regeneration of the Bracknell Town Centre, the collective response to the pandemic, and the overall quality of services. The team recognised that most residents are happy with the council's work and the support they receive.
- 5.5 The full review report is included in Appendix A. Whilst the feedback from the peer team was overwhelmingly positive, there are a small number of recommendations and suggestions for the council to reflect on. These eight recommendations are set out below along with an initial response;
- 5.6 **Recommendation 1: Stability has brought success and it is now important to recognise and plan for the next five to ten years.**
- 5.7 Recommendations one to three clearly stem from the decision of the current Chief Executive to retire in the autumn after more than 19 years in post. However, the council has articulated a long term vision based on continued economic prosperity, inclusivity, protecting the environment and delivering effective services. Within this long term framework, which has largely been in place since the mid 2000's, the council primarily focuses on medium terms plans covering four years – the life of each council – articulating these in the Council Plan and the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- 5.8 However, long term plans for projects which shape the future of the Borough such as the town centre regeneration driving the establishment of the Joint Venture have proved very successful. The four year planning cycle is in place for a new Chief Executive to lead the council into the May 2023 elections and to work with Members to translate the majority parties manifesto commitments into a Council Plan for 2023 – 2027. Under the new Chief Executive leadership, it may be an appropriate time to develop a longer term vision internally for the council.
- 5.9 **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.**

- 5.10 Members have considered their expectations for the future and the key roles they would expect a new Chief Executive to fulfil. This has included reviewing structure options. They have concluded that the current organisational structure is appropriate for the future and that the current culture is an important part of the reason for the council's sustained record of success. In this respect, Members are clear that the new Chief Executive needs to be able to work with and develop that culture rather than fundamentally change it. This has provided a clear direction for the recruitment process and the planning that has taken place thus far allows for an orderly transition.
- 5.11 **Recommendation 3: A clear vision for how the Council works in the future is required.**
- 5.12 Much of the strategic approach to this is covered in the preceding paragraphs in relation to recommendations one and two in terms of structure and approach.
- 5.13 **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.**
- 5.14 Data on the pandemic is updated daily by the Berkshire East Shared Public Health Team. Deep dive reports into the impacts of the pandemic are produced by the Bracknell Forest Public Health Team and presented regularly to CMT, to assess impacts, actions and any communications messages required. Data is also used at frequent Member briefings and at the Local Outbreak Engagement Board.
- 5.15 National guidance is followed to ensure consistency of messages. Where local data requires different action within the borough, these are signed off by CMT and Executive Members following scrutiny for the Health Protection Board. A recent example of this local approach relates to schools whilst case numbers remained very high. This adaptable approach was informed by the local data and demonstrates that council has adapted where there are potential benefits for residents and employees.
- 5.16 The council's approach to working arrangements of staff is under constant review, with regular changes to the way in which working takes place. This is not a one size fits all approach and depends on the service needs. Key to these changes is up to date risk assessments and regular covid testing. Again, this is led by the data and the council have adopted a cautious approach to a full workplace return. This matter is reviewed regularly at CMT Gold and messages shared with staff via a weekly email from the Chief Executive, Forest views and DMT briefings.
- 5.17 Managing an agile workforce is a key element of work being led by the organisational team to adjust to managing a workforce that will be part office based and part home based.
- 5.18 **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.**
- 5.19 Over the past two years the council has significantly developed relationships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and adapted to meet the needs of residents across the community, including those considered vulnerable such as through the community response programme.

- 5.20 The 2021/2022 budget included specific additional resources to support the voluntary and community sector emerge from the pandemic to focus on priorities they had identified. One part of this funding was used to commission the local VCS support organisation (Involve) with additional resource to undertake a comprehensive mapping of all organisations in the voluntary sector and community. These include grassroots organisations and those commissioned by the council, the CCG, charities, and the faith sector. Part of this work will include reporting on the support for residents vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, particularly in light of the pandemic.
- 5.21 The council's aspirations to support the sector continue with the development of the community hub and collaborative space in the Time Square office, which will welcome many more residents than previously, when the time is right to open the building again.
- 5.22 A council wide working group was set up in 2021 to review the support for vulnerable people, particularly with the aim of taking a preventative approach.
- 5.23 There is also work underway to support residents vulnerable to financial hardship and increasing financial equality. The council has ringfenced £300,000 to reducing these pressures for families in 2021. This fund is in addition to the central government grants that have been distributed by the council to the community. A needs analysis is currently underway, in conversation with VCS partners, to identify those households most at risk of financial hardship and identifying what additional support is needed locally.
- 5.24 **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.**
- 5.25 In recent years the council have adapted communication and engagement with the community, with a push towards "digital first". Many people now opt to get in touch via social media platforms. But this is not a single pronged approach. The adaptation of the main council office, Time Square, has transformed the space into a more customer focused environment. When the building is fully reopened after the pandemic – probably in April 2022, the downstairs space now includes rooms that can be booked by community and there is now the café space for more informal conversations with residents.
- 5.26 In the last 12 months the council have also recruited an additional Reaching Out Community Project Manager, a Community Engagement Officer as well as two further Communications and Marketing Officers and a number of COVID Response Officers. Therefore, even whilst the office has been closed there have been a wide variety of routes through which residents are regularly in contact. This community engagement will continue even when Time Square can reopen.
- 5.27 **Recommendation 7: Ensure your economic renewal plans are informed by risk assessments given the uncertainty of Covid recovery and Brexit.**
- 5.28 A business survey was undertaken in 2021 focussing upon recovery and impacts of Brexit, the results were shared with partners businesses and other stakeholders. The outcomes resulted in several actions such as the identification of grants to support businesses transitioning out of COVID-19 restrictions.

- 5.29 An economic recovery fund of £600k was allocated to events and improvements to Bracknell Town Centre, Crowthorne and Sandhurst and local centres. This was following the review of economic assessments and data for the local area. The funding is aimed at developing high impact events to bring people back to shop and eat and access leisure attractions. The funding was split over two years to ensure a regular stimulus for Bracknell Town Centre in particular. The 'Tree Giants' initiative in August 2021 received national publicity and the outcomes and impact collated post event and being used to develop the next event "Bracknell Forest Springs" in April and a further Tree Giants event in August/September 2022.
- 5.30 The strategic risk register includes the impacts of the pandemic against all aspects of the council's work. It has also previously included risks directly associated with Brexit however this aspect has now been absorbed within the business as usual risks. The assessment is reviewed by the Corporate Management Team and the Strategic Risk Management Group at least quarterly, this identifies actions in place to respond to the pandemic and other matters such as the economic impacts on residents.
- 5.31 The councils Joint Venture project will continue to be assessed in the current economic environment and monitoring the projects' risk registers are built into the council's business as usual operation.
- 5.32 **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?**
- 5.33 Along with most of local government, the council supports hybrid meetings and can see great value in them. When it became clear in April 2021 that the Government would not make provision for this to continue as a matter of course, the council moved quickly to put in place a scheme of delegation to continue to hold fully remote meetings. The decision was risk assessed and significant mitigations are in place to ensure that there is full member involvement in decisions.
- 5.34 Throughout the use of remote meetings there has been a marked increase in public participation.
- 5.35 It should be noted that in the few instances where the law prevents decisions being delegated, in person public meetings are arranged attended by a quorum of Members to ensure social distancing.
- 5.36 With regard to Executive decision making, a significant proportion of such decisions have always been constitutionally delegated to Individual Executive Members or Officers and so have not been affected during the Pandemic.
- 5.37 The action plan set out in Appendix B has been developed with input from across the organisation. It is recommended that this action plan is reviewed in September 2022 to reflect on progress of the actions set out.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice

- 6.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

Financial Advice

- 6.2 Not applicable as there are no financial recommendations made within the report.

Other Consultation Responses

- 6.3 CMT and the Executive have previously been consulted on the position statement and the draft findings report.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.4 Not applicable as the actions set out in the plan are primarily managerial actions or those already considered as part of service level planning. There are no further direct impacts on the local community.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.5 The peer review report and action plan does not directly impact any of the strategic risks.

Climate Change Implications

- 6.6 The recommendations in Section 2 above are expected to have no direct impact on emissions of CO₂.

The reasons the council believes that this will have no impact on emissions are that the actions set out within the action plan are primarily managerial actions or those already considered as part of service level planning.

Background Papers

None

Contact for further information

Katie Flint, Chief Executive's Office - 01344 352217
Katie.flint@bracknell-forest.gov.uk