

# **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge**

## **Bracknell Forest Council**

**17-18 and 23-24 November 2021**

Feedback report





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## 1. Executive summary

The Corporate Peer Challenge at Bracknell Forest Council found many positives that the organisation and its leadership can be rightly proud as it performs well in a wide variety of areas. Members have a clear focus on delivery of good services and through a clear set of priorities with a golden thread from the political manifesto, through the Council Plan to service delivery. The Council is rightly proud of achieving its longstanding aim of regenerating the Town Centre and residents are consistently happy with the Council and its services as well as the support they received throughout Covid.

Staff with whom we spoke see the Council as being bold but realistic. During Covid staff responded quickly and effectively to virtual working and maintained a strong focus on the wellbeing of both residents and the employees themselves. This was led by the Leader and Chief Executive.

Members have a good understanding of what they need to do to deliver for residents, this includes an awareness of the capacity of the organisation and the need to work with partners. Positive Member officer relationships are based upon a clear agreement on how the Council is run and there are high levels of trust between Members and officers that cascades throughout the organisation leading to stability.

Partners speak highly of the Council and those who lead it, they know who to talk to and typically get a thoughtful, informed and positive response to issues of joint endeavour. The business community is prominent in the Council's thinking and all opportunities are explored and, if there's a good business case, developed.

The Council is proud of its stable and consistent financial position and has a history of maintaining strong reserves. The Corporate Management Team, the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny maintain a strong oversight of financial management and are well engaged in planning and monitoring. There continues to be a focus on achieving and maintaining financial sustainability. Financial risks are well understood with effective management and mitigations including transition plans for the use of reserves for that purpose.

Stability has brought success and it is now important to recognise and plan for the next five to ten years. 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. Other comments and recommendations are included in the body of the report.

## **2. Key recommendations**

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. Whilst the feedback from the peer team was overwhelmingly positive recounting the Council's many successes the following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

### **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?

## **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

### **3.1. 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:

- **Lorraine O'Donnell**, Chief Executive, Cheshire East Council
- **Councillor Alan Jarrett**, Leader of Medway Council
- **Becky McIntyre**, Director of Governance & Partnerships (s.151 Officer), North Lincolnshire Council
- **Sarah Reed**, Executive Director of Corporate Services, West Northamptonshire Council
- **Marcus Coulson**, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

### **3.2. 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 your governance arrangements.

### 3.3. 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 interviews were conducted as critical friends, using a no-surprises approach collecting information in a non-attributable manner whilst triangulating their findings to give feedback in good faith.

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 four days onsite in two lots of two days on 17-18<sup>th</sup> and 23-24<sup>th</sup> November 2021 in Bracknell, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 36 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 52 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 and in good faith.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

Bracknell Forest Council is performing well and rightly proud of its achievements. Members have a clear focus on the delivery of good services in the Borough and a clear set of priorities, with a golden thread from the political manifesto, through the Council Plan to service delivery. A key achievement is the longstanding aim of regenerating the Town Centre which has reached completion of the first phase with plans in place to develop further.

The Council collects data demonstrating that residents are consistently happy with the Council and its services and the support they received throughout Covid in a variety of areas. The staff with whom we spoke see the Council as being bold but realistic with all opportunities and decisions being carefully considered from a variety of positions to ensure they add value to the delivery of successful services. There are robust performance management arrangements, through which activity is closely monitored and assessed to ensure it meets expectations.

The Council responded well to Covid through the mobilisation of staff and the swift move to virtual working. Impact analyses are used to inform future the development of Council Plan delivery. The Council is good at responding to issues that arise and addresses them at pace. This includes; the response to climate change and work to reduce carbon emissions, community impact assessments, behavioural change work with communities, the Forest Giants initiative and the work on weekly food waste collections that had high participation rates.

Staff commented on there being a 'learning culture' in the organisation and pointed to their experience that when things don't go well the Council sought to identify why and then actions were taken to make improvements. Some of the examples the peer

team heard about were the changes made to delivery plans that sit underneath the overall Council Plan to incorporate new priority areas such as Covid and Climate Change. There was also the creation of a project group to address some of the findings from the staff survey with reference to diversity issues. With regards to supporting those with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the Council identified that it was not performing as well as it should. It put in place an improvement plan to address the shortcomings and improve the outcomes for children. The plan recognised – and the recent Ofsted inspection confirmed – that there remains more work to be done in this important area and the Council continues to focus on this area as a key priority.

#### **4.2. Organisational and place leadership**

The Members demonstrated that they have a good understanding of what they need to do to deliver for residents, which includes an awareness of the capacity of the organisation and the need to work with partners. Members have a clear focus on the delivery of good services for residents which drives the nature of the political discussions amongst themselves and then with officers. The relationships between Members and officers are described by both groups as positive and business like based upon a clear agreement on how the Council is run. This consensus is respectful and for the Leader and Chief Executive very longstanding. The evident high levels of trust between Members and officers cascades from the leaders throughout the organisation that leads to stability of decision-making and organisational culture, something that is to be welcomed and even celebrated.

Partners speak highly of the Council and those who lead it. The peer team noted that all partners with whom we spoke described an open engagement from those in the Council. They said they knew whom to talk to and typically get a thoughtful and informed response to issues of joint endeavour. Consideration is given to proposals based on the evidence that it will add value to the work of the Council and the Place.

Similarly, when looking wider, the business community is prominent in the Council's thinking and from the evidence the peer team saw all opportunities are explored and, if there's a good business case, developed. These opportunities are then progressed and monitored towards delivery and completion. The Senior Executive Members who direct these activities are knowledgeable, well-informed and dedicated to their work

and that of the organisation. As a result, the Council can successfully influence key partners who have significantly larger footprints such as the Integrated Care System (ICS) and the Local Economic Partnership (LEP).

The Corporate Management Team (CMT) work well together providing a clear steer on the direction the political priorities require. They communicate well with each other and the organisation with regular Senior Leadership Group (SLG) meetings too. Staff told us that CMT and the wider SLG are accessible. For example senior staff are now more accessible through online processes and all directorates have regular catch ups with the director and assistant directors and wider, regular “Chalk and Talk” sessions to help drive the Council’s key business actions. Another example was the weekly email from the Chief Executive that started at the beginning of Covid and continued to include general updates about what is happening across the Council.

With the recent appointment of a new People Director the peer team heard about an emerging forensic approach to using data to drive improvement coupled with a clear strategic vision across Children’s and Adults Services with better alignment to the transformation goals of the organisation.

#### **4.3. Governance and culture**

The culture of Bracknell Forest Council is regarded by Members, staff and partners as ‘can do’, well organised and positive with a clear focus on the delivery of good services for residents. Staff described the culture as very caring, open to challenge, generally inclusive as well as being proud and ambitious. The political leadership is driven by Members with officers managing the delivery of the priorities, this is a well-established and stable arrangement from which residents evidently benefit. It certainly benefits staff and partners. Member engagement was described as being very professional and very friendly with members described as passionate, positive and good at feeding back.

There is extensive use of Member Policy Review Groups to inform Executive decision-making which negates the need for Overview and Scrutiny call-ins because the options and evidence for decisions, have been discussed and agreed. Overview and Scrutiny are engaged with the Executive and management and have an active workplan which is inclusive of minority groups and that, in turn, informs improvement and policy development.

The Council Staff showed genuine pride in working for what they see as a very good employer who treats them with respect and relies on them to deliver.

During the Covid pandemic staff responded quickly and effectively to virtual working and maintained a strong focus on the wellbeing of both residents and the employees themselves. This was led by the Leader and Chief Executive, with the latter's updates referred to by staff as very welcome in that they gave direction and clarity in a time of great uncertainty. Staff favourably compare the positive and trusting culture at Bracknell Forest Council with other organisations they have worked in.

Members in the Council see relationships with parish councils as important and joint working with parish and town councils is advanced and effective. This is aided by the number of 'twin hatters' who are members of both organisations.

There is an emerging focus upon the Equalities Diversity and Inclusion Agenda to address some results in the staff survey and is a typical example of how the Council seeks to address issues that arise. Another example is the 'Absence of Malice' work that is thoughtful, taking an educational approach to improve behaviours in the workplace. There is a new Workforce Strategy with the aim of embedding a "One Team" response and the aspiration to be an Employer of Choice.

#### **4.4. Financial planning and management**

Bracknell Forest Council is proud of its stable and consistent financial present position and has a history of maintaining strong reserves. CMT the Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny function maintain a strong oversight of financial management and are well engaged in planning and monitoring. There is a focus on achieving financial sustainability and financial risks are well understood through effective management and mitigations including transition plans for use of reserves for that purpose.

Although the Council is amongst the lowest for Council Tax rates and has been for a number of years, there is a strong tax base which has steady growth. Council Tax provides the most stable source of revenue to local authorities and a growing tax base provides a solid foundation upon which to ensure financial sustainability.

Good financial management exists at all levels across the organisation with accountabilities well understood, there is regular budget monitoring to CMT and SLG

with good engagement from budget holders. The financial planning process includes a discussion of 'best case/worse case' scenarios to increase the robustness of decisions. The senior leadership of the Council understand the risks and opportunities in respect to the financial implications of Adults and Children's Social Care and Non-Domestic Rate (NDR) risks. The Executive and CMT have annual awaydays to work on budget planning so that relevant issues are made aware to all and discussed.

The peer team saw evidence that there is a pragmatic and proportionate approach to commercial investment that has been adopted, for example careful financial analyses was carried out before the £100 million out-of-area investments were made. The capital programme is delivering positive change in the Borough, such as the first phase of the Town Centre regeneration.

A plan is in place to begin to address the High Needs Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit. A Project has been agreed, in consultation with Bracknell Forest Schools Forum, which aims (over a 3-5 year period) to reduce the deficit of the High Needs Block (HNB) element of the schools' budget by implementing and monitoring key elements of the SEND commissioning plan and developing a robust strategy and delivery model. The workstreams (*Evidence from Schools Forum Report: [Information Item Template \(Blank no guidance\) \(bracknell-forest.gov.uk\)](#) Project Plan: [Summary of project scope October 2021 \(bracknell-forest.gov.uk\)](#)) cover 9 areas of focus with clearly defined governance structures in place. There is Council wide support for this and the peer team saw examples of resource prioritisation from the contingency budget to fund additional interim staff for the SEND Team.*

#### **4.5. Capacity for improvement**

The Council has benefited from a long period of political and managerial stability with a calm, reasoned and authentic leadership style that has enabled the Council to achieve its priorities and outcomes. It has a track record of delivering improvement which is a strong platform upon which to drive future development.

The impact of Covid on staff was quickly recognised and the Council prioritised staff well-being through flexible and well supported working practices. A collaborative culture was required to respond effectively and there are some excellent examples of effective working during Covid for example:

The Home Library Service extended its reach from about 80 residents receiving books at home to over 500. It was reported that these visits were highly valued by those who received them as well as by their families and carers as it may have been the only contact they had with the outside world during the time of lockdown.

The Forest Giants initiative was where the Council and The Lexicon retail and leisure complex located in the town centre teamed up to celebrate the Borough's forest. This cultural development was successful as it created the largest footfall during this period. This promoted the preservation and conservation of the forests surrounding the town and idea of it as a community asset for everyone to enjoy and explored how local people can help preserve it for future generations. The related Forest Guardian programme worked with local schools in the autumn to encourage children to learn about the forest around them and facilitate tree planting as part of the Borough's tree strategy.

The Council also completed Community Impact Assessments to understand what has happened to communities during the pandemic, so it can plan effectively for the future. There was also the re-deployment of staff across the organisation to fully deliver services during this time.

The Council is seeking to learn from these experiences to positively inform future plans and actions.

The Council is well placed to be a system leader on a wider footprint than the Borough boundaries if it so chooses, partners would welcome the Council stepping further into this space. The opportunities would be to consider assessing further potential risks and horizon scanning at the regional and sub-regional level. For example looking at the changes to office working that may impact on the decisions of large companies siting their headquarters locally, the impact of Brexit on Heathrow and wider objectives. It would be the case that some of the impacts for Bracknell Forest residents will be driven by what happens in neighbouring authorities and vice versa. The Council is a more stable, and arguably, successful local authority so bringing its expertise into wider arenas would benefit residents, local businesses, and the wider region.

An issue for the Members that sometimes arises is that a lack of coterminosity

between the Conservative Group and some of the local Constituency Associations may at times cause Group tensions.

The Council is aware of the need to widen the cultural offer whilst ensuring the Town Centre attracts even more residents and visitors by delivering further phases of development.

## 5. Recommendations

In the view of the peer team and from talking with key leaders in the Council the stability of the long-standing partnership between the Leader and Chief Executive along with many in the Executive has brought success to the Council. This is a strength that is recognised and it is now important to recognise and plan for the next five to ten years. This is because 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. One aspect of that will be to agree on what the vision is for how the Council works in the future and the type of character who comes into post. Is more of the same required or is there a desire for a different direction?

This issue of stability kept recurring through the peer team's visit and is a consequence of the stability of leadership and is therefore why a change to this stability needs to be planned and carefully managed. Given the longevity of the leadership arrangements it could be difficult for the Council to imagine a different style of leadership. Wanting more of the same (i.e. continued success) should not preclude considering a different leadership style.

The restrictions and arrangements that currently exist nationwide to deal with the evolving Covid pandemic have thrown up some inconsistencies and anomalies. As the Council moves to living with Covid it should continue to review the COVID data to guide our ways of working, protecting our workforce and service delivery.

The peer team suggest that the Council consider whether it could do more to meet the needs of vulnerable residents and communities and build on the approach with the Voluntary and Community Sector. As well as providing a collaborative space, this could be about enhancing current services as trusted partners with vulnerable people and expanding the evolving work on health and care. Although there has been a lot

done for individual and family resilience, it was suggested that there could be a more collective focus on community resilience.

Whilst the peer team had a significant number of interviews, conversations and focus groups whilst onsite it was not possible to get a comprehensive view of every aspect of Council business. With that in mind the peer team suggest that the Council assures itself that it is fully customer centric, especially as it has moved to significant levels of virtual working, the peer team had a sense that Covid has distanced the Council from direct customer interaction. There were a number of people who described the potential risk of emotionally disconnecting with others when always in a virtual environment. The history of Bracknell Forest as a new town with a comparably good housing mix, means that deprivation is likely to be more hidden than in other areas and there is a need for the Council to be proactive in looking for it. The experience of dealing well with arrangements around Covid will help with this.

The Council should also ensure that economic renewal plans are informed by risk assessments given the uncertainty of Covid recovery and Brexit. There was a good level of awareness from both senior leaders and Members in respect of the impact on the Council finances regarding the potential change to the ratings list for telecommunications business with transitional plans factored into the reserves strategy. Whilst onsite the peer team saw the extent of growth in housing through a range of developments and the next phase of the town centre regeneration. The Community Impact Assessment highlighted some challenging questions in respect to the economy and businesses regarding the future role of employment, shopping, and leisure areas and what could be done locally to address the national economic challenges. Our recommendation is intended to re-iterate the focus that has commenced.

### **Considerations on Governance**

From the evidence that the peer team saw there are good governance arrangements within the Council and in partnership arrangements. CMT and SLG had effective management governance with relation to budget monitoring, the Council Plan and delivery and performance issues. The Council Constitution is regularly reviewed and the role of the Monitoring Officer is respected.

The Members on the Overview & Scrutiny Panels and the Task and Finish Groups

are engaged and active, including in the development and creation of policy.

There was some feedback that some health partners would like greater clarity on the relationship between the Health and Wellbeing Board and Health Scrutiny. This may be due to a lack of clarity by some individuals unfamiliar with the architecture of local government governance and could be fairly easily identified and addressed.

At the time of the onsite work, the peer team noted that all meetings were continuing to be remote and ask the question if this is still proportionate? Most local authorities reverted to physical meetings from May 2021 with appropriate risk assessments and Covid safe arrangements in place. Although it has been recognised that some Planning Committees will need to meet in person, it was not clear where the impetus and drive for planning Full Council for budget setting as a physical meeting was coming from. Exploration of the technology required to enable hybrid meetings was being explored but we didn't get a sense of a plan B for that meeting if the technology was not implemented.

In the experience of the peer team many authorities continued decision making during Covid without the need for extended delegations. So in this context the question arises if their continued use is proportionate?

## 6. 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, 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](mailto:mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk).



**On behalf the peer challenge team, December 2021**

**Marcus Coulson**

Programme Manager

**Local Government Association**