

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Braintree District Council

10-13 October 2023

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

A strong ambition to provide the best possible services to communities underpins the approach in Braintree District Council (BDC) and this ambition is complemented by the commitment of experienced members and officers, focused on serving residents and businesses effectively. Staff are committed to delivering high-quality services, though capacity risks exist in some areas. BDC performed well during the 'Bouncing Back Together' plan which ran to March 2023. 54 out of 66 projects were completed with eight more on track and making good progress at the time of the 2022/23 annual performance management report. A new Chief Executive working closely with the Leader enables the council to build on this success going forward. Priorities for improvement include transforming services through digitalisation, commercialisation, and shared services. Members and staff embraced the peer challenge process with openness and honesty, as a vehicle for learning and to drive improvement.


Effective collaboration and partnership working is a strength. BDC plays an active leadership role locally and regionally, such as the Chief Executive recently taking on the position of Lead Chief Executive for the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA), enabling representation of the district and North Essex Councils (NEC) at a regional level. The peer team spoke to public sector partners at all tiers of local government, in health, the police, business, external providers and the voluntary sector. It was evident that the council is regarded as an active and reliable partner across the board. Extending its activity to the local and regional levels allows BDC to position itself strategically as a district, recognising its role and responsibility within the wider context of governance and service delivery. BDC can further these successful efforts by considering the potential for strengthening its strategic partnering and commissioning with the voluntary sector who are keen to work more deeply with the council. This aligns with the broader goal of leveraging resources to meet the needs of the local community efficiently. Peers recommend strengthening connections with its town and parish councils which could enhance overall community delivery and collaboration, aligning with the council's broader commitment to a vision for the district as a whole, informed by its wider parish and village family.

BDC understands its financial challenges and its financial position in 2023/24 is stable, with reserves that were consistently bolstered during the last 3 years, the council has a strong awareness of its future budget deficits, which present a

challenge. For 2023/24, the budget required a £644,000 withdrawal from reserves and there is a budget deficit projected in coming years, with a £2m gap forecast by 2026/27 if no action is taken. BDC has developed a robust Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) that aligns with its Treasury Management Strategy, allowing for responsible financial planning and management which is reflected in the council's high level of reserves compared to CIPFA benchmarking. Although the financial position is reasonable, like every council, there is a challenge facing BDC and it is necessary to address the £2m budget gap by 26/27. Peers strongly recommend developing and communicating a well-resourced transformation programme which seeks to balance the budget as a priority.

BDC has a strong track record of strategic investment in commercial assets to generate income streams. The council has a significant historic commercial property portfolio with a multimillion-pound rental income budget and risks related to yields are actively managed and actions taken to mitigate where appropriate. Since its 2013 Corporate Peer Challenge, BDC has clearly focused on a proactive approach, with notable initiatives like the Plaza, Horizon 120, and I-construct showcasing the council's commitment to diversifying its resources and assets for the benefit of its community, contributing to its overall financial health and resilience. Peers recommend maximising the use of council assets to be clear on their purpose – regeneration, social or commercial – to maximise income through capital investments. For example, the majority of Causeway House, the council's main office building, is not currently in use. Options for Causeway House are actively being considered alongside options for other office-space assets that are currently leased out but are coming up to lease renewal dates. In the local government context, the council recognises it is about ensuring that assets are leveraged for the greatest benefit, whether it be for regeneration, social good, or financial sustainability.

The council is developing a new Corporate Strategy to set strategic vision and priorities for the next phase of its improvement journey. BDC is now well placed and has an opportunity to engage stakeholders, communicate ambition, and achieve buy-in across the council and its partners. The Leader, Chief Executive and senior management team recognise the need to increase the pace and scale of delivery and change to achieve the objectives set out in its emerging Corporate Strategy. The council has demonstrated it can deliver transformative projects, such as its strategic investments and regeneration initiatives. Continuing this drive and momentum will



require strong leadership and alignment at all levels. Peers recommend that the council should leverage the Corporate Strategy development process to clearly articulate and share its vision, ambition and strategic priorities with staff, members, partners and communities. This will provide the foundation for driving greater pace of change.

The phrase ‘the Braintree way’ came up frequently in interviews with staff, which captured the commitment from officers to providing an excellent service for residents however it was also used to indicate that there may be some reliance on goodwill when it comes to capacity. Senior leaders recognise the devotion to the council from officers and are keen to ensure that they bring staff with them through the transformation journey they are about to embark on. There appeared to be some tension among officers around flexible working and its inconsistency across the organisation. The new Agile Working Policy presents an opportunity for managers to review old working arrangements from the COVID-19 era and check that the arrangements in their teams are the most effective to meet the team’s performance goals and council needs. With a new Corporate Strategy and a new vision for the district in place, ‘the Braintree way’ may have to evolve or be refreshed as it aligns with its organisational development strategy and harnesses staff and resource potential.

Strong strategic leadership will be needed from the top tiers of management and Cabinet to turn the Corporate Strategy into clear direction for staff and transformational change for the council. Senior leaders should inspire the workforce around the vision and enable delivery through trust and empowerment. Peers recommend developing a workforce and organisation development strategy, combined with a change management strategy, which would equip the council with the focus and tools needed to successfully manage its people through significant change. Peers recommend that the council's risk appetite should be reviewed to ensure it is appropriately aligned with the change ambitions set out in the emerging Corporate Strategy. Essentially, translating the Corporate Strategy into tangible change actions will require unambiguous direction from strategic leaders, empowered staff, sustained partnerships, enhanced scrutiny and willingness to pursue innovation.

2. Key recommendations

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

2.1 Recommendation 1

Clearly develop and communicate BDC's vision supported by clear internal and external-facing leadership; linking refreshed values and strategic priorities to ensure organisational connectivity.

2.2 Recommendation 2

Maximise the council's leading role as a valued local and regional public sector strategic partner with others.

2.3 Recommendation 3

Establish the new 'corporate priorities', with an ambitious delivery plan with a golden thread through MTFS, strategies, processes and prioritisation. Support this by an evidence-based performance management programme.

2.4 Recommendation 4

Encourage innovation within the context of a mature approach to risk management.

2.5 Recommendation 5

Develop a well-resourced and SMARTer transformation programme that clearly identifies the roles of senior leaders to deliver corporate priorities and seeks to innovate and balance the budget, supported by an effective change management strategy.

2.6 Recommendation 6

Create a workforce and organisational development strategy that tackles issues around capacity, skills gaps, succession planning, health and wellbeing, and retention.

2.7 Recommendation 7

Maximise the use of council assets to be clear on their purpose – regeneration, social or commercial to maximise income through capital investments.

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:

- Lead Officer Peer: **Laura Taylor**, Chief Executive, Winchester City Council
- Lead Member Peer: **Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen**, Leader, Breckland Council
- Senior Officer Peer: **Tina Mustafa**, Programme Director & Assistant Director Neighbourhoods, Tamworth Borough Council
- Senior Officer Peer: **Cassandra Clements**, Managing Director, East Suffolk Services Limited
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager: **Aimee Wittams-Smith**, Regional Adviser
- **Daniella Howell** – LGA Programme Support Officer

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 and achieving improved outcomes for all of its communities? How is the Council utilising its place partnerships to understand local priorities, both within and across boundaries; and how are place partnerships working together to deliver outcomes? What steps has the Council taken to mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis on communities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities? What role is the Council playing in shaping the future of public services across the system?
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? Is the Council utilising partnerships to drive improvement? What programmes does the council have in train to ensure continual improvement is embedded?

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 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 three and a half days onsite at Causeway House, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from 47 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to 111 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.

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

There are examples of good public engagement and the use of data to inform policy such as the Economic Development Strategy, which supports the Local Plan. This kind of evidence-based policymaking is key in local government, alongside effective measurement of progress and success through comprehensive reporting and analytics. Equally, there are examples where there could be more robust use of data to inform policies, such as the EDI policy. Peers recommend making strategic use of data across the council, which can provide deeper insights into needs and enable effective targeted intervention. For example, informing the Leisure Strategy with data and further collaboration with Fusion Lifestyle, the external leisure provider.

The peer team heard that performance data is used to create dashboards, particularly at service level, however there is scope of improvement in aligning multiple systems to extract fuller and clearer data. The peer team understood from managers that there is a more transactional and operational approach to measuring performance. With a cohesive/single performance management and evaluation process, BDC could identify Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and regularly review and update them with precision.

Braintree District is made up of three towns (Braintree, Witham, and Halstead) and a network of villages and smaller settlements, and it appeared to be generally recognised by officers and members that the four entities are *“so embedded in the residents, it gets embedded in the work”*. There is an opportunity to adopt a more unified vision for the entire district, providing a clear basis for developing council priorities. The need for a refreshed and widely communicated Corporate Strategy is apparent, to ensure a clear and coherent link between the council's vision, policies, and operations. Once the Corporate Strategy is embedded, strengthening relationships with the voluntary sector can enhance delivery and enable BDC to increase its understanding of, and engagement with, the wider community.

Increasing the skills base in the district is widely acknowledged as important for BDC, as in-district salaries are the lowest in Essex and only 25% of the population is qualified at NVQ4 and above whilst there is no higher education provision located directly in the district. Evidence collected by peers indicates that work on the ‘skills agenda’ declined during the pandemic, with schools stepping back from the Skills

Board, and now BDC are engaging in a wider Essex conversation on skills. The council is collaborating with the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB) to secure longer-term funding for green skills initiatives such as a skills centre for clean energy, building on the success of the 'I-Construct' Innovation Hub situated in the Horizon 120 business park in Great Notley. The council should set out clear plans to influence and achieve improved skills levels through further initiatives and consider where it could maximise the use of its assets to achieve this, whilst recognising the need for assets to have a sustainable financial position, for example by targeting the rental of its business spaces.

In response to the cost-of-living crisis, BDC has taken measures to address the impacts on its residents. The Leader and Cabinet initiated a cross-party committee to assess the situation and recommend interventions, and a cost-of-living partnership group involving key stakeholders was also established to understand what the impacts are and how successful interventions to date have been. In January 2023, the council created a Cost-of-Living Investment Fund using New Homes Bonus money, with a focus on improving food security and access to essential goods, aiding the community and voluntary sector in supporting vulnerable residents, and promoting physical and emotional well-being, particularly among young people facing barriers to leisure activities and sports club participation. Key projects underway include the 'Here to Help' initiative, winter resilience project, holiday activity programme extension, new distribution centre for a foodbank, new delivery service for a foodbank, extension of the sport for confidence service, energy advice and support line, energy grants, increased resources for employment support. In addition, a contribution of £25 per Council Tax bill was also made at the start of this financial year at a cost of £1.6m. This proactive response reflects the council's commitment to addressing the needs of its residents amidst the changing economic landscape.

Public Health concerns include the highest rate of excess winter deaths in Essex, levels of adult obesity exceeding the national average, and physical activity participation among adult residents behind both the national average and Essex's lowest figures. Braintree District has the fourth highest level of suicide in Essex at 12.4 per 100,000 residents, and suicide rates in Essex are higher than the national average. The council needs to evidence how it will seek to reduce this with partners through its new plan. The council is working with the Mid Essex Alliance on the development of health and wellbeing priorities to support its new LiveWell Strategy

and continues to work with partners including the Active Braintree Foundation, Fusion Lifestyle and the Braintree District Museum Trust to enable physical and emotional health and wellbeing support for residents. The council is also working with the Mid Essex ECC Childrens Commissioner to develop the Mid Essex Feel Well subgroup, focusing on collaborative approaches to supporting children, young people and parental health and wellbeing. Peers recommend using an evidence-based performance management evaluation programme to test the success of strategies like LiveWell.

The council has taken many positive steps to address climate change, it has declared a climate emergency and adopted a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan which is currently being revised for 2023/24. BDC has made progress in decarbonising council-owned heritage assets, such as listed buildings, through measures like installing efficient boilers and LED lighting. It works with partners across the system on sustainability, but leadership could potentially champion and direct climate action more visibly and boldly. Performance reporting indicates all current projects are on track, such as increasing renewable energy and fuel security within the district and rewilding initiatives. Essex authorities are also working together to fund a new Biodiversity Net Gain officer and develop a cross Essex guidance document to support the implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain from November of this year. The recent Culture Peer Challenge at BDC found that the Housing and Communities team, in partnership with the Local Cultural Education Partnership (LCEP), has successfully engaged schools in climate change projects using arts and culture. There's also growing recognition of climate anxiety among children and young people, and creative interventions are suggested to support them and align with the LiveWell Strategy and Climate Change Strategy.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

The council has had long-term political stability, with its current Leader in place for nearly two decades, providing continuity and strong political leadership. There are multi-party politics with 26 Conservatives, alongside Labour, Green, Independent and Halstead Residents Association councillors. The Joint Executive Team (JET) formed of members of the Senior Management Board and Cabinet meets fortnightly and provides a strong forum to tackle issues of corporate importance to achieve a joined-up leadership perspective. Whilst Cabinet is highly regarded internally and members are committed, engaged and embedded in their local communities, there is more to

do to ensure effective ownership of the transformation journey at a member level. This will ensure members are able to provide cohesive and strategic leadership to the organisation around the key priority areas. In terms of place leadership, there is an opportunity to forge a more impactful relationship with the Braintree Association for Local Councils (BALC) by setting out a plan for structured engagement. Although district councillors are on many parish and town councils, building on recent efforts by officers to cultivate relationships would prove beneficial to both the council and local communities.

BDC demonstrates a strong commitment to advancing its community through priority projects and significant investments such as Eastlight's £3m community programme, £71.5m on new facilities for place shaping, a significant spend on town centres, a £2m package of economic growth projects with NEEB, UKSPF, and the Horizon 120 business innovation and logistics park. Investments such as these demonstrate a clear commitment to shaping place for residents and businesses. Eastlight are keen to further build on their collaborative working relationships with the council and the Chief Executive should continue to foster this opportunity.

Collaborative engagement and partnership working are at the core of BDC's approach to addressing the diverse needs of its community and achieving positive outcomes for its residents. The council has developed mature partnerships across multiple sectors that enable impact at scale. For example, the Mid Essex Alliance with health agencies advances shared goals around public health, while collaborating with Essex County Council, the police, and neighbouring authorities combines resources to assess and address challenges that extend beyond district borders. The peer team heard from Eastlight social housing providers, and Fusion Lifestyle, a charity provider of BDC's leisure services. External stakeholders widely praise BDC for its dependability, proactivity and commitment when working together and collaborating over shared outcomes. The council actively participates in partnerships like the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB) to drive economic growth and is exploring future shared services with neighbouring authorities to enhance financial resilience. These partnerships align with the overarching objective of leveraging available resources efficiently to meet the diverse needs of the local community.

BDC has a clear *"passion for place."* The peer team's conversations with a wide range of partners clearly indicate that *"BDC is always 'can-do' rather than 'nothing we can do' or 'not my problem'"*. The council demonstrated strategic agility and effective

partnership working in responding to the complex situation at RAF Wethersfield. Stakeholders including health, police and Local Resilience Forum (LRF) partners praised the practical, resident-focused approach to the site's use. This balanced response highlights strong place focused leadership.

Beyond its range of successful partnerships, BDC is seen as a dynamic driver of change. The Chief Executive has recently taken up leadership responsibilities at the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA) and Chairs the North Essex Councils (NEC) Chief Executive group which has harnessed the strong relationships and partnerships established through NEEB. This expanded involvement on both local and regional fronts positions BDC strategically as a district, acknowledging its broader responsibilities and influence in not just service delivery, but conversations such as devolution and shared service arrangements.

The outward-facing visibility and commitment of senior leaders both political and managerial is welcomed by staff and members, although there is some work to be done internally to achieve BDC's goal to bring staff along with them on the council's transformation journey. The peer team heard about capacity issues across the council, and staff indicated that *"the Braintree way has lost its way"*. Project management currently appears to be an add-on responsibility for many staff rather than a dedicated role. Whilst it is evident that BDC has committed and knowledgeable officers at every level, focused project management resource and expertise will be required to support the delivery of the ambitious transformation agenda and BDC are currently recruiting for a new Project Management Officer to respond to this need. Peers suggest it would be helpful to conduct a detailed workforce analysis to identify and understand the current and future skill sets of staff, ensuring resources are reviewed so there is capacity for delivery. This approach will provide a solid foundation for optimising their capabilities to the fullest potential.

Consistent communication and strategic leadership from senior management and the Cabinet is essential to translate the Corporate Strategy into a clear roadmap for staff and partners to deliver transformative changes within the council. The vision will need to be communicated effectively but also inspire the workforce and provide them the confidence and empowerment to drive its realisation. Once the vision for the council is clarified, consideration should be given to further development for individuals in key roles so that a broader range of key individuals, both members and officers, are able to talk with confidence about the council's aims for the area. To

navigate significant change effectively, peers recommend that the council should invest in a comprehensive workforce and organisational development strategy, coupled with a robust change management strategy.

The council implemented flexible working arrangements that allowed for effective response during the pandemic. The dedication and resilience of staff during this time is an example of the positive outcome of 'the Braintree way'. However, the peer team heard about inconsistencies in the application of flexible working arrangements, and it remains uncertain if these arrangements are serving all staff as intended. Officers and members both expressed that there could be improved 'virtual visibility' for those working from home, such as clearly communicated contact information with availability and working hours, and more opportunities for staff to come together face-to-face. It was noticeable at the staff forums attended by the peer team that this was the first time many of the officers had met one another. To address this, BDC was reviewing its Agile Working Policy in consultation with trade union representatives at the time of the CPC. This presents an opportunity to communicate it widely with staff and managers who can in turn evaluate team arrangements. Peers recommend enhancing this with increased opportunities for staff to engage with one another and the senior leadership such as monthly in-person staff forums or arranged face-to-face get-togethers. BDC has achieved so much, celebrating those successes and bringing staff together to see the bigger picture is vital in developing unity.

4.3 Governance and culture

The general message from officers and members alike is that BDC is a great place to work and that the council has a family atmosphere. The Leader is seen by staff as knowledgeable, open and transparent. Staff feel that BDC is a friendly council, and that they have autonomy and freedom to be creative. Relationships with two trade unions are generally positive and lead to good outcomes. There does, however, appear to be some hangover from pandemic working and the culture of past senior management. Staff quoted *"Work is hard, but I feel valued. My work environment makes me want to give up my time to do more"*, *"My laptop is on every night just to get through the work"*. Peers consider a refresh of the approach to organisational development and ways of working would be of benefit to ensure positive service outcomes. The peer team heard from staff that the new Chief Executive has had a positive impact on morale and culture since his arrival a year ago, however they would like some more corporate visibility internally from the senior team, such as

through staff forums and wider circulation of the Chief Executive's newsletter.

BDC has established a robust governance framework enabling lawful and accountable decision-making, through defined separation of powers and productive member-officer relationships. This constitutional foundation offers stability amidst changes like the emerging Corporate Strategy. As the council moves into a period of elevated ambition, governance will need to flex and strengthen as the organisation transforms. While the Scheme of Delegation is fundamental in ensuring transparent and efficient governance, there are elements that may inadvertently impede progress. For example, contract renewals over £150,000 in value require Cabinet sign-off, even if the new contract represents a cost decrease for the council. This mandatory step, though intended to maintain accountability, can inadvertently slow down decision-making. It is essential to strike a balance between oversight and the ability to adapt to evolving circumstances, and to ensure that staff know when they should seek authority. The scheme's adaptability is an area that BDC has recognised, and it has committed to updating the scheme accordingly. An iterative approach will ensure that the delegation structure remains relevant and effective and contributes to the pace and scale of change.

Constructive cross-party working is supporting effective governance in practice. Opposition groups are invited to attend Cabinet meetings and indicated that senior officers engage with them in a responsive and informative manner. Reinstating regular Group Leaders briefings could further promote inclusion and enable effective opposition input through scrutiny. Views on the relationships between opposition and administration members were mixed. While naturally some political friction exists between groups, priorities seem aligned with the administration's aims. As one opposition member stated, *"We would love to see some work to say we are one Braintree"* - indicating a shared vision for the district and *"Culture of Place and Culture of Organisation"*.

BDC have recently adopted a new Risk Management Policy and Strategy, and the commitment to risk management is evident, reflecting a responsible approach. Strategic risks are identified by senior management and reviewed through risk workshops with members. These feed into the Corporate Strategic Risk Register which is scrutinised by the Governance and Audit Committee. Financial risks are mitigated, for example through the use of earmarked reserves, close budget monitoring, and recovery plans. Major projects have dedicated risk oversight through

specific governance boards, key risks like cost inflation and recruitment challenges are being actively monitored and managed. In order to take BDC to the next level, peers recommend that a review of the council's risk appetite to ensure it aligns appropriately with its ambition for increased scale and pace of change.

Historically at BDC, formal scrutiny processes such as call-ins have been underused as a result of the inclusive way that the cabinet works with the opposition. However, the council now has a new Scrutiny Officer in post and with a new Chair of Scrutiny they are seeking to strengthen the impact and performance of scrutiny arrangements. Focused officer support and training for members will support embedding new practices and pave the way for more regular opportunities for members to contribute to the committee's forward plan and bring Cabinet before the committee to be held to account. The Governance and Audit Committee at BDC is functioning effectively, with engaged members. In particular, the Chair and Vice Chair demonstrate strong command of issues with a well-developed understanding of risk and how this aligns to the MTFS, providing oversight. Senior management value and cooperate with the Audit function, enabling it to operate successfully and independently.

While some members find officers highly responsive, others report slow communications and difficulty accessing staff at times. There may be opportunities to "shift dependency towards independence", by equipping members to self-serve as a first port of call. Overall, members indicated that they were satisfied with the member development programme led by the Organisation Development and Learning team and felt that the member induction pack was excellent. Future development need is identified by the Governance team based on hot topics such as devolution and RAF Wethersfield, necessary training such as Code of Conduct, and required skills such as Charring. One area that the peer team identified there could be more support for members is around civility in public life. Several members expressed concerns about their safety as councillors in the public realm, particularly for women. This should be actioned as a priority.

The council is just embarking on its transformation journey, but it is essential that the basics are in place to support wider, perhaps more significant, change in how the council functions. Post-COVID-19, amid the backdrop of the Cost-of-Living crisis and global challenges, the demands placed on the council have amplified. The casework that staff support has evolved to become more complex and challenging. As a whole staff are willing and ready to help, so it is important that they are supported to do so.

The council has a good wellbeing offer including Mental Health first aiders and an Employee Assistance Programme, however the top reason for sickness absence is stress/anxiety and it appears that there could be more direct support for those handling the more complex casework. To facilitate this journey, peers recommend a golden thread integrating HR policy reviews, a well-defined workforce development strategy, consistent appraisals, ongoing training, and enhanced communication, which will be key in equipping the staff for the road ahead.

4.4 Financial planning and management

BDC has a net revenue budget of £17.5m for 2023/24. Positive financial stewardship has led to strong financial performance in recent years, consistently overachieving against budget and maintaining a healthy level of reserves despite pandemic fluctuations. As a result, BDC's reserves levels are higher compared to The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) near neighbour benchmarking. The Council exhibits robust strategic financial planning, with a detailed process for developing the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and aligning the capital programme and Treasury Management Strategy. The current MTFS projects a £2m budget gap by 2026/27. Savings plans so far appear to be tactical rather than transformational, plugging the budget in the short-term with more accessible marginal savings. Detail of the financial challenges are not fully owned across the organisation, so the council has work to do on increasing organisational budget awareness and how zero-based budgets work.

A reserve of £850,000 has been invested into non ongoing transformation costs for 2023/24, and work is set to begin imminently. A comprehensive transformation programme should form a core pillar within BDC's improvement process. With a forecasted budget gap of £2m by 2026/27, a 'business as usual' approach will not close this structurally. Peers recommend that the council should take a multi-year, whole-system approach to reviewing service delivery models, maximising digital enablement, and identifying efficiencies. This requires dedicated resources and governance, but done well, transformation can enhance outcomes as well as financial sustainability. Clear timescales, accountabilities, regular progress monitoring and engagement of members and staff will support effective delivery.

ICT has been identified as an area of concern for BDC, primarily due to cyber security risks and staffing pressures. Cyber security represents one of the most

significant risks currently facing the council. However, potential mitigations exist. For example, members currently receive allowances to purchase their own ICT devices, but providing corporately managed devices to members could enhance cyber security while realising savings in allowances. This option is worth exploring given ICT's importance to council functioning and ongoing staffing vulnerabilities.

There appears to be an underlying belief among members that shared services will substantially support addressing BDC's projected budget gap. However, staff perception is that the focus on back office shared services overlooks the potential for sharing frontline place services like street scene which may offer additional efficiency opportunities and should be reviewed. The benefits of shared services are not just financial efficiencies - increased capacity and resilience are equally important in the current context of recruitment and retention challenges. Shared services do not automatically generate dramatic savings but are still worthwhile where they enhance the efficiency of the services being provided. The developing shared services proposals with Colchester and Epping Forest councils will require a clear business case quantifying service quality, risk reduction, and efficiency benefits. Shared services based on open partnerships rather than financial constraints alone have the best chance of success. By undertaking rigorous due diligence, BDC can implement sustainable shared models that balance pragmatism, strategic need and transformation requirements.

Wethersfield airfield asylum accommodation represents a complex long-term challenge with many uncertainties. As a known unknown, it will require dedicated council focus for years and it is clear it will be a strain on the capacity of the organisation dealing with the various aspects of it. The issues across housing, social care, community relations and local infrastructure will be multi-faceted. In recognition of this, additional resources or external funding will need to be secured. BDC has received initial payment of the one-off Asylum Large Sites and Vessels Grant from the Home Office, which must be used within specified criteria to address service pressures associated with the Wethersfield asylum accommodation. While beneficial, the grant terms mean it cannot cover wider budget impacts or the council's own legal costs incurred challenging the site usage which currently stand at £172k. With operations potentially continuing for four years, longer-term financial sustainability and its impact on staff capacity remains a concern. BDC should account for fluctuating but ongoing Wethersfield demands in budget and resource

considerations, as well as other known and unknown challenges of this scale and complexity.

The council's ambitions need to be underpinned by continued robust financial planning. As priorities are defined, the resources and investments required for delivery should be clearly quantified. This applies to revenue, capital, assets and other sources. Financial strategy then needs to pinpoint how resource needs will be met through savings, commercialisation, council tax, fees and charges etc. Peers recommend that programmes and strategies across the council must directly align with available resources so collective accountability for budgets can be fostered.

There is opportunity for BDC to maximise the use of council assets to be clear on their purpose – regeneration, social or commercial – to maximise income through capital investments. There appeared to be a question over the future of Causeway House, the council's main office building. The majority of the site not currently being used and the space does not align with the council's requirements for hybrid working. Consultants have been brought in to enable hybrid ways of working and maximise the efficiency of the space in the immediate term, whilst longer term alternatives are considered. By being intentional about assets' strategic purpose and making the most of what it has, BDC can carve out a clear future for the way the council works. For example, Citizen's Advice (CAB) could move into Causeway House if that is where the council workforce will continue to be based. Examples where councils have provided office space for CAB include Harlow, Epping Forest and Basildon. By having the CAB on-site, the council can closely align service delivery and referrals, create public access efficiencies, and visibly demonstrate their support for this vital voluntary organisation assisting vulnerable community members. It embeds the CAB's essential support role into the fabric of public services.

The capital programme is frontloaded, with reduced amounts being allocated to future years following a period of significantly heightened capital expenditure, and borrowing is low with minimal debt compared to other councils in the region. The council has a significant historic industrial and commercial property portfolio with a multimillion-pound rental income budget and is not reporting any problems in relation to risk. No concerns have been flagged by external audit in the interim reports for 2019/20 and 2020/21 which have been submitted to the Governance and Audit Committee to provide assurance, though national delays exist and the completions of all audits from financial year 2019/20 onwards are still outstanding. Peers

recommend proactive risk management with scenario modelling, this will be growingly important in the current financial context. Diversifying the property portfolio over time and maximising value from assets can minimise threats. Maintaining its healthy reserves provides BDC with security to smooth out financial uncertainty as and when risks materialise.

BDC benefits from an experienced and insightful Section 151 officer who has served the council for many years. This longevity provides deep institutional knowledge that will be invaluable in guiding the council's improvement journey. The Section 151 officer's strong relationships and respect enable them to speak truth to power with credibility. Their leadership on the Senior Management Board and Governance and Audit Committee cements their central role, and succession planning ensures retention of strong financial control and oversight.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

BDC has undertaken incremental savings programmes in the past, including initiatives like the £1.6m Challenge and the Investment and Development Programme to track delivery against it. While past savings plans have been appropriate, a transformation programme will now need to be defined and resourced. Peers highlighted that this programme should incorporate service reviews, technology & automation opportunities, and assets rationalisation. Transformation must be understood organisation-wide, staff want to assist transformations but need dedicated programme management capacity. Peers recommend a clear purpose linking transformation to corporate objectives and outcomes for residents should be communicated. Following the next transformation plan, the council could consider implementing a continuous improvement culture so that change is part of everyone's roles and less impactful on workloads.

Like many councils, BDC is experiencing recruitment and retention challenges in certain service areas. Specialist services requiring professional qualifications are especially difficult, and retention problems then create service bottlenecks. BDC specifically cites hard to fill roles in legal, planning, finance, environmental services, asset management, and landscapes. These are continual problem areas nationally, given competition from the private sector and the shift to hybrid working opens competition from further afield. Targeted approaches are needed like clear career pathways, professional training, and market-responsive rewards. Workforce planning

must account for turnover risks. BDC do make use of apprenticeships, with 19 apprentices recorded in people performance measures, though not in all service areas. With data-driven, proactive strategies, BDC can better secure the talent needed to deliver for residents now and in the future.

Staff indicated that the “*Senior Management Board listen and are willing to consider new ideas.*” This is a great basis for including staff in the transformation process every step of the way. Professional development creates organisational learning opportunities and staff should be supported to innovate as well as incorporating mechanisms for all stakeholders' ideas which will create capacity for innovation and improve services. Coupling this with enhanced performance reporting will support and test continuous improvement.

In summary, while incremental changes have been beneficial, BDC requires a systematic, resourced transformation programme to meet escalating challenges and strategically respond to future budget gaps. This demands strategic focus through the new Corporate Strategy plus engagement with informed staff and partners, supported by an effective change management strategy. By clearly communicating the "why", and supporting the "how", BDC's transformation can be an improvement journey for residents and staff across the council.

5. 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 ten-month check-in session, which provides space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser for the East of England region, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Rachel is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk, 07795076834.

6. Additional information

6.1 ICT

The LGA has a [Cyber, Digital and Technology](#) offer for councils. This includes access to a [free cyber 360 service](#) and advice and guidance from experts. For more information or to discuss bespoke requests contact: jamie.cross@local.gov.uk

The City of London Police is running two Cyber security briefings for councillor on [13 November](#) and [15 November](#). The briefing will provide impartial and practical cyber security advice, including examples of current threats relevant to councillors with a range of cyber security experience and options to make them more secure.

6.2 Transformation

The LGA will be supporting councils with their transformation plans through our programme of [masterclasses](#) and [workshops](#).

Our Transformation programme is informed by two groups of local government officers – the [Transformation Network](#) and the [Behaviour Change Leads Group \(BCLG\)](#). These groups give officers valuable opportunities to learn new techniques, network, share notable practice, and hear from guest speakers.

Through our [Transformation and Innovation Exchange \(TIEx\)](#) self-assessment tool, our [Transformation Capability Framework](#), and our database of [Transformation case studies](#), we will support councils to identify what works well in transformation, providing them with intelligence and resources to support successful transformation.

Transformation Experts

The LGA's [Transformation Experts Programme](#) offers bespoke advice and support to local authorities to help them deliver transformation activities. We have a cohort of Transformation Experts who have delivered transformation programmes in their own councils. Our Transformation Experts will be linked up with councils who request ad hoc support to provide expert advice. This could range from reviewing their council plans and projects, to offering constructive challenge based on their own experience and knowledge. The type of support will be led and determined by the needs of the recipient council. The support will be available for a maximum of 10 days until March 2024.

Contact: Olivia.Lancaster@local.gov.uk or Michael.Balls@local.gov.uk

6.3 Civility in Public Life

A free [personal safety for councillors webinar](#) will take place on 30 November. Councils can also request workshops on personal safety or online safety for councillors through our grant funded civility support offer, for more details see the [Civility hub](#).

6.4 Workforce

The LGA provides a [workforce offer](#) for councils. The LGA Workforce Team is able to provide support to up to forty councils this year with tailored workforce support. This bespoke support aims to address specific and complex workforce challenges. To discuss, please contact: Nigel.Carruthers@local.gov.uk