

# **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review**

Braintree District Council

4 June 2024

Feedback



**Corporate Peer Challenge**

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# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 10-13 October 2023 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately ten months after the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the early progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's RAG rated CPC Action Plan.
- Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs.
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank Braintree District Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

# 2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Braintree District Council took place (onsite) on 4 June 2024.

The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge:

- Clearly develop and communicate BDCs vision supported by clear internal and external-facing leadership; linking refreshed values and strategic priorities to ensure organisational connectivity.
- Maximise the council's leading role as a valued local and regional public sector strategic partner with others.
- 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.

- Encourage innovation within the context of a mature approach to risk management.
- 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.
- Create a workforce and organisational development strategy that tackles issues around capacity, skills gaps, succession planning, health and wellbeing, and retention.
- Maximise the use of council assets to be clear on their purpose – regeneration, social or commercial to maximise income through capital investments.

For this Progress Review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- **Lead Member Peer:** Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader, Breckland Council
- **Lead Officer Peer:** Laura Taylor, Chief Executive, Winchester City Council
- Aimee Wittams-Smith, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

When the peer team first engaged with Braintree District Council (BDC) eight months ago, the council was navigating the aftermath of the pandemic, emerging devolution proposals, and tackling significant external pressures, for example, establishment of the asylum centre at Wethersfield.

BDC welcomed the peer team to offer insight and support to help them improve services further. In response to the peer team's seven key recommendations, BDC created a comprehensive response plan with 52 actions and this RAG rated plan indicates all actions are underway with a significant number completed. Particular attention has been given to the launch of the 'Fit for the Future' transformation programme which sets the council's approach to tackling a critical financial situation

in addition to providing best quality services. New senior staff have been recruited to important posts and work on the vision is underway. Importantly, members across the chamber recognised the efforts of the Leader to engage them more in the work of the council and this was welcomed.

Despite ongoing challenges, including those posed by the Wethersfield site, BDC have continued to respond to national pressures for instance conducting funeral home inspections, while ensuring internal progress remained a priority. Quarterly business plan updates to the cabinet underscore BDC's commitment to transparency and continuous improvement. Although the devolution process faced setbacks due to political disagreements, BDC has continued to collaborate with neighbouring councils to align priorities and ensure Essex's readiness for future opportunities. The council's significant progress over the past eight months is commendable, demonstrating a strong dedication to positive change and strategic development.

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

On arriving at Causeway House, it was evident to the peers that BDC are actively promoting their new vision 'we will be ambitious, support each other and work together in new ways to achieve outstanding results'. Posters around the building highlight the core values 'we value everyone', 'we work together' and 'we are flexible' and senior staff referenced the vision in discussions throughout the progress review. The peer team were advised that BDC undertook staff briefings to shape the values, as well as working with managers and by using staff surveys. The core values were launched at a staff wellbeing day in March 2024 and councillors were actively involved in the development and communication of the vision.

The new corporate strategy, encapsulating the vision, was endorsed at full council in March 2024 and has since been published on the council's website. BDC launched a publicity campaign, with press releases and social media posts. Building on the foundation of the corporate strategy, BDC has developed an annual plan that outlines specific actions to deliver the priorities linked to the vision. The plan aligns with the themes and priorities of the corporate strategy and was presented to the cabinet in

May 2024 and subsequently published, establishing transparency and accountability to the public.

BDC has taken steps to ensure that staff members are well-informed about the vision and how it is being delivered. The chief executive's blog, staff engagement sessions, and chief executive drop-ins are designed to reinforce the connection between day-to-day operations and the overarching vision. In May 2024, a dedicated landing page on 'The Beehive', the council's intranet, was planned to further highlight the vision and its relationship to the annual plan projects. Additionally, staff and manager engagement sessions have been conducted to foster a deeper understanding of the vision and encourage active participation in related delivery.

BDC has planned a series of external communications initiatives including a full page spread in the upcoming September 2024 issue of Contact Magazine, dedicated to the vision, while social media postings throughout the year will link to the annual plan and emphasise the vision's importance. These efforts demonstrate BDC's commitment to transparency and engagement, ensuring that the vision is not only well-understood but also actively supported by the community it serves.

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

The peer team recognised effective collaboration and partnership working as a strength during the CPC. Since then, BDC has continued its good work, taking on a series of actions around planning, health, community safety, and cementing its active role within North Essex and the wider East of England region.

The chief executive continues to influence strategic partnership working across North Essex and the wider county, chairing the North Essex Councils (NEC) and East of England LGA (EELGA) chief executive groups. The peer team were informed that for the first time, all nine local authority partners of the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB) have secured financial commitments to support the delivery of the 2024/25 action plan, demonstrating the collective dedication to regional economic growth. Furthermore, Councillor Butland has been elected as chair of the Essex Leaders and Chief Executives (ECLE) forum, enhancing BDC's influence at the county level.

BDC has strengthened its involvement in regional planning efforts by collaborating with organisations such as the Essex Planning Officers Association (EPOA), and East of England Planning Association on regional planning initiatives. This will be further enhanced when the new head of planning joins the team in July 2024.

The peer team heard that BDC has benefited from a wider range of data provided by community safety and health partners, which has significantly enhanced the annual strategic assessment. Strengthened health partnerships include collaborating with the Mid and South Essex Integrated Care Board (MSE ICB) and involvement in Livewell Strategy 2024-28. In the realm of community safety, BDC has taken a leadership role by coordinating and managing the Regulatory Authority Group (RAG) and conducting the district's strategic assessment to shape the Community Safety Partnership (CSP).

BDC continues to collaborate with the local Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS), Community 360 (C360), to create and increase community capacity and has engaged with Essex County Council (ECC) to discuss the requirements of the CVS for the district and assist in the commissioning process. Although ECC has put this initiative on hold, BDC remains committed to working with them to shape the work of the CVS. Additionally, the council is working closely with other statutory stakeholders, including the ICBs, to support the organisations in the community and voluntary sector to strengthen their governance structures.

BDC continues to co-chair the Multi-Agency Forum (MAF) and, along with ECC, works with partners to monitor the Home Office and their contractors in the operation of the large site asylum centre at Wethersfield to ensure it complies with regulations and mitigates the impacts on the community. The council continues to plan for emergencies within the Essex Resilience Forum (ERF), and the chief executive serves as the vice chair of the ERF, further highlighting BDC's commitment to resilience and emergency preparedness.

To maximise its relationships, the peer team heard that BDC are now keen to do some work with partners to assess how their corporate plan is looking and feeling for them from an external perspective.

**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**

One of the key actions in response to this recommendation was a comprehensive audit of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) across all services to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information. This audit led to the refinement and updating of KPI guidance, providing a firm foundation for performance measurement.

BDC is currently in the process of reviewing and aligning its KPIs with the corporate priorities outlined in the corporate strategy, ensuring their continued relevance and effectiveness in local governance arrangements. Senior managers regularly review KPIs during quarterly meetings with directors and heads of service. Peers were advised that these meetings provide an opportunity to challenge the relevance and achievability of the KPIs and identify areas for improvement, which encourages accountability and enables teams to effectively brief their portfolio holders, contributing to improved member oversight.

Peers heard that BDC recognises the need for a cultural shift towards more outcome-focused performance measurement, away from traditional KPIs focused on operational metrics such as call times and missed bin collections. The council's transformation programme ‘Fit for the Future’ aims to redefine what constitutes good performance, emphasising the importance of metrics that capture the overall effectiveness and impact of services to communities. This shift, coupled with ongoing efforts to educate and engage members in the appropriate interpretation of KPIs, aims to contribute to a more holistic and robust approach to performance management.

Efforts have been made to ensure members are equipped to respond to the change in use of the office building – that staff may no longer be at the same desk they used to always be at. BDC are launching a members enquiry email address so there isn't a reliance on existing relationships with certain officers and Microsoft Teams telephony is being rolled out for an effective response for members and residents. Officers advised the peer team that they will continue to work to ensure all members are kept up to date about changes to the ways of working. There has been an all-member briefing on the transformation programme, which includes the Agile and Flexible

workstream while updates are provided to cabinet fortnightly and opposition group leaders are provided an update monthly. As more changes are put into place, further briefings for all members will be key.

In addition to the KPI review, BDC is developing a new business plan template to ensure the vision, themes, and priorities of the corporate strategy are embedded within each service area. This template will be shared with the management board towards the end of the summer, further reinforcing the alignment between strategic objectives and operational plans.

BDC is also working to align all templates, including business cases, project plans, and committee templates, with the corporate priorities. The new Programme Management Office (PMO) manager has already begun to lead this effort and reported that it is expected to be achievable within the set timeline. The PMO manager is taking a comprehensive approach to streamlining processes and ensuring consistency across the council. This includes categorising projects based on their size and complexity, developing proportionate governance and assurance frameworks, and creating standardised templates and guidance for project management. Peers were advised that colleagues have been receptive to the PMO manager's efforts, and resources are expected to be readily available to support this initiative.

In just eight months, there has been significant progress, with further work in the pipeline. BDC is currently exploring options for performance management systems and developing a new performance management framework linked to the corporate strategy's vision, themes, and priorities. The review of current performance management reporting processes, systems, and presentation is ongoing, with recommendations for improvement expected by the end of the year.

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

BDC has taken a proactive approach to ensure that its risk management framework remains robust and encourages innovation while maintaining a mature approach to risk management. In 2023, the council conducted an extensive revision of its risk management policy and strategy, which laid the foundation for further development of

its approach during 2024.

Recognising the need to align its risk appetite with the ambitions set out in the new corporate strategy, BDC is setting its risk appetite and how it can be nuanced across different activities. This review is being undertaken as part of broader efforts to update the risk management policy and strategy.

To foster a culture of risk awareness and effective risk management, peers heard how BDC has continued to deliver training to members and key officers, including an evening with members to go through all risks and explain them individually. Risk appetite has been applied to each strategic risk and peers observed that further work could be undertaken to measure the risk appetite of the whole organisation.

In addition to fostering innovation within its operations, BDC has developed a digital strategy that outlines the approach to leveraging technology and improving its use across the organisation. The council works closely with the Essex Digital Partnership to horizon scan emerging technologies and explore innovative ways to enhance digital capabilities. Peers were informed that this year BDC is planning a technology day to showcase emerging technologies, facilitate discussions on innovation in data usage and the application of technology, whilst addressing cybersecurity concerns. Furthermore, innovation is being built into the IT shared service workstream, ensuring that technological advancements are embedded in the council's operations.

The technology day will provide an opportunity to explore the "art of the possible" by featuring a futurologist and exhibiting emerging technologies through various stalls. The event will be held in a hybrid format, allowing for both in-person and virtual participation. BDC's digital strategy encompasses three priorities: a digital council (focused on internal operations), a digital customer (enhancing customer engagement and enabling residents to upskill), and a digital district (supporting the digital economy, digital skills in businesses, and promoting digital adoption in sectors with low digital uptake).

While the transformation programme was initially considered a strategic risk, it is now viewed as a mitigation strategy. BDC recognises the importance of allowing staff sufficient time to adapt to changes and aims to strike a balance between implementing transformative initiatives and maintaining operational stability. Moving forward, BDC plans to engage with the cabinet to assess and define the

organisation's overall risk appetite. This collaborative effort will ensure that the council's risk management approach aligns with its strategic objectives and fosters a culture of informed risk-taking while maintaining appropriate safeguards.

**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.**

With the forecasted £2.3m funding gap by 2027/28, BDC has embarked on an ambitious transformation programme, 'Fit for the Future', which was officially launched to employees and all councillors in March 2024. The programme seeks to develop mitigation strategies and a programme of work to close the MTFS financial gap, avoiding the use of reserves. Peers heard there had been strong engagement with members throughout the development process of the programme. The governance and reporting structures were agreed by the Joint Executive Team (JET) and top-level design principles received cabinet approval. A joint workshop with cabinet and the Corporate Management Team (CMT) co-designed the approach for the Service Review element of the programme. This effort was complemented by a presentation and Q&A session for all members, ensuring transparency and open communication. Peers heard how members from both the administration and opposition indicated that the leader had gone above and beyond to ensure that everybody was included in the process.

The 'Fit for the Future' programme aims to be guided by a holistic approach, considering the council's functions, service delivery methods, and resource allocation across various services and partnerships. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) will be posing three strategic questions to teams to assess what services should continue, how to best deliver them, and how ensure effective delivery. The goal of these questions is to encourage a critical examination of the council's operations and foster collaborative decision-making, ensuring that service reviews are not conducted in isolation by individual heads of service.

The council is confident in the engagement and support from senior leadership, members, and JET, and is working to raise awareness and foster buy-in among staff.

Peers emphasise the important next steps to involve wider staff in the process, ensuring they are well-informed about the programme's objectives and actively participate in its implementation.

The 'Fit for the Future' review process will also encompass an evaluation of the council's large contracts, examining whether they provide the best value for money and exploring opportunities for cross-cutting efficiencies, such as shared IT contracts. BDC acknowledges the limited pool of providers and customers in certain areas, like revenues and benefits, which can hinder innovation from service providers.

It was evident BDC recognises the importance of managing future demand for services and striking the right balance between resources and service delivery. One of the significant challenges BDC predicts is working with partners to work out how to manage demand for services going into the future, and how to best balance resources. The council aims to achieve financial resilience by 2027/28, whilst ensuring its healthy balances are directed towards benefiting residents while avoiding the pitfall of implementing savings without corresponding service delivery.

This is a positive and honest approach, and to initiate the conversation and gather input, BDC has posed 11 questions to service areas, engaging all enabling and professional services in preparation to ensure the right information is in place. The council plans to prioritise the review of functions based on input from members during the strategy workshop, considering factors such as the complexity and potential impact of each function.

In the interest of efficiency and value for money, BDC continues to explore shared service opportunities with Epping Forest and Colchester Councils, particularly in back-office functions. Peers heard there is an enthusiasm for some of the more place-based transformation conversations with wider Essex to take place. BDC will be in a good position to feed into those once the 'Fit for the Future' programme has built on the strong foundational elements that are in place.

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

An organisational strategy has been developed and launched, setting the basis for further initiatives. Peers were informed that staff briefing sessions were held to consult with staff on the future values and behaviours, and a new organisational development strategy is currently in development. BDC is designing a new approach to better understand capacity, skill gaps, and succession planning within its services. This initiative is scheduled for completion by December 2024 and should inform the council's strategy for talent development and retention. As part of the 'Fit for the Future' transformation programme, BDC is undertaking an organisational design review. This core workstream aims to ensure that structures and processes are aligned with the council's strategic goals and remain responsive to change whilst delivering efficiency.

Peers observed feelings among staff of being overburdened and isolated, which was potentially driven by the change from a perceived positive and collaborative in-office environment to flexible and remote working. Peers noted that although BDC have now set out a team lead approach to flexible and remote working, this may be worthy of review in due course to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the organisation and communities it serves.

Staff shared openly with peers how they value personal contact with colleagues and seek more human connection and support from management, especially during challenging public interactions. Putting some clear standards and expectations in place around consistent 1-2-1s and team meetings would enhance managerial support and visibility through regular check-ins and feedback sessions.

Staff also raised concerns about the pressure to meet targets, highlighting the need for enhanced clarity about managerial expectation. They indicated they were keen to help with the next steps of the 'Fit for the Future' programme. Peers heard from senior officers that historically the 'team lead' service reviews are more effective than those with 'experts brought in', and they do recognise that capacity and resource continues to be an issue. The work being undertaken to review services provides a great opportunity to review resources against the workload.

BDC are listening to ideas from staff, for example peers noticed pride flags in the reception which they were advised was a direct ask from several staff. Smaller changes such as swapping the order of first and second names on Teams and

emails and recognising where staff need more than one monitor on their desk, were referenced by senior staff as outcomes from the increased staff engagement. Staff shared uncertainties about whether their feedback leads to meaningful changes and indicated that they desire a more inclusive approach to contribute ideas effectively internal communication needs to continue to assure staff feel that they are being listened to.

Senior leadership and members feel that SLT and CMT are more visible within the organisation now, however this is not yet reflected in the views of staff. The core values were launched at a staff wellbeing day in March 2024, which was attended by 70 per cent of staff in the office that day (142 staff in total). There were also several drop-in sessions presenting what the new office will look like and it was reported that staff were happy to be all on one floor as one team. Peers suggest a more informal approach with staff drop-ins and face-to-face time with the chief executive could be more impactful and help staff feel engaged and increase engagement at events such as the wellbeing day. Whilst the future direction is yet to be determined, it was apparent to the peer team that BDC are keen to build on the success and learning of previous activities.

In addition to these efforts, BDC is reviewing its approach to recruitment and retention for the organisation. The review encompasses an evaluation of the current total reward package and explores options for discounted healthcare benefits. By offering competitive and comprehensive benefits, the council aims to attract and retain top talent, fostering a highly skilled and motivated workforce.

With the new values and behaviours launched across the council, BDC know what the trajectory is, what they need to do and how they are going to do it. This is a great foundation to make sure there is space for everybody to feel supported.

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

One of the key initiatives undertaken by the council in response to this recommendation was the establishment of a property and asset strategy group. The group is responsible for coordinating asset and property intent and activities across the council, ensuring a cohesive and strategic approach to asset management. To

further strengthen its asset management capabilities, BDC has appointed a new head of property and asset management, who joined in April 2024. The first of the ongoing monthly meetings of the property and asset strategy group was held in January 2024, setting the stage for regular discussions and coordination efforts.

To establish a comprehensive and well-defined approach to asset management, BDC has commissioned the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to develop a new asset management strategy and action plan. CIPFA's expertise will ensure the council's approach to its asset portfolio is aligned with best practices and tailored to its specific needs. This suite of documents is expected to provide a solid foundation for the council's future property and asset management activities. Looking forward, the head of property and asset management will use this framework to define the council's future work programme. Peers noted that this was a positive step to ensure a cohesive and coordinated approach to managing the council's asset portfolio.

BDC is also continuing to deliver against the 2023 asset management review action plan. The head of property and asset management has reviewed the Lambert Smith Hampton Asset Management Review and will incorporate its outputs into the CIPFA suite of asset management documents. Concurrently, the council is progressing actions related to clarifying roles and responsibilities, data cleansing, rent and lease renewals, conditions surveys, and ensuring sufficient capacity to support the delivery of its maintenance programme. Consideration should be given as to how members can contribute to and scrutinise this area of work.

As part of the 'Fit for the Future' programme, BDC is planning a review of its operational asset requirements following the outputs of the organisational design workstream. While some elements of the operational asset review will be incorporated into the asset management strategy, the comprehensive review is unlikely to be completed or fully actionable until the end of the financial year and onwards, as the service reviews within the 'Fit for the Future' programme progress.

Significant work has taken place to develop new floor plans for the council's main office building, Causeway House, with the goal of consolidating all staff onto a single floor and renting out the remaining space. Furthermore, BDC has engaged in discussions with partners, such as Witham Town Council, to explore the potential for

sharing assets and revising the grant model for organisations that own community assets. Drawing from successful past experiences, such as leasing halls to the CVS, where ownership is transferred to the organisation while the council provides support, BDC is actively seeking innovative solutions to maximize the use of its assets and foster community partnerships.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Braintree District Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

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