


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Breckland Council

02 March 2023

Feedback





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# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 13 – 16 June 2022 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 six-months after the council published the CPC action plan, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations.
- Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs.
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank Breckland Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. This six-month 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 Breckland Council took place on-site on 02 March 2023.

The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

- Action Plan Feedback
- Inspiring Communities
- Communication
- Summary Feedback & Reflections

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

- Lead Peer - Kevin Dicks, Chief Executive, Bromsgrove & Redditch Councils
- Lead Member Peer – Cllr Peter Fleming, Leader, Sevenoaks Council

The peer team met face-to-face on-site at Breckland Council over the course of 6 hours with the following representatives from the council:

- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader
- Cllr Paul Claussen, Deputy Leader
- Cllr Alison Webb, Executive Member for Health and Communities
- Cllr Jane James, Executive Member for Customer and Corporate Services
- Maxine O'Mahony, Chief Executive
- Rob Walker, Deputy Chief Executive
- Steve James, Executive Director
- Sam Armitage, Community Services Manager
- Matthew Barnard, Communication Manager

### 3. Progress Review - Feedback

The Leader and Chief Executive of Breckland Council were keen to invite peers back on-site to continue the conversation around organisational improvement and to demonstrate how the council has responded to the feedback and recommendations peers identified during the CPC process in June 2022.

Peers were made to feel very welcome and consistent with the previous visit there was a positive atmosphere throughout the workspace with a notable increase in the volume of colleagues within the office environment.

The progress review was structured into four key areas: An overview of progress against each peer challenge recommendation followed by two focused themes 'Inspiring Communities' and a discussion with emergent work on internal and external 'Communications'. The visit finished with summary feedback and reflections from peers.

## Action Plan Feedback

Following the corporate peer challenge, the council promptly prepared and published an action plan demonstrating how it intended to respond to the report improvement recommendations.

As part of the progress review preparation, the council provided peers with a self-assessment position statement, detailing the status (RAG) of each recommendation with accompanying notes detailing the progress made. Peers were encouraged that the recommendations had been taken seriously and that the changes were being positively received. It was great to see that 9 recommendations were either completed or on-track (green) and one requiring some further attention given an amber status due to timing. Peers were satisfied with the self-assessment and supplemented discussion that good progress is being made against the recommendations with clear evidence and initial impact.

The discussion on action plan progress with accountable officers and portfolio holders was open and honest, with clear examples where strong progress has been made and equally the small number of areas where further attention is required to ensure the maximum benefits can be fully realised. There is a good awareness that some recommendations will require ongoing attention to ensure improvement is embedded and sustainable change is achieved. For example there is strong awareness from the Leader that ongoing leadership, challenge and support will be required to ensure all staff and members are collectively accountable for the financial targets being achieved. It is worth noting, however, that a range of actions and support has already been delivered and contributing to this recommendation, ensuring there is a sound understanding of the financial context which translates into staff and member behaviour will require consistent leadership and focus. Great progress is being made with other related activity impacting this work area.

Peers were informed of the implementation of a performance board. The first meeting had a full agenda and facilitated discussion between the Leader, Chief Executive and staff on performance improvement and efficiency. The council has a strong work culture, encapsulated through *#teambreckland* which has driven internal change and aligned the workforce to the council's corporate objectives. Peers observed an increased level of organisational maturity, evidenced by the performance board

where the forum enabled a service manager to articulate a business challenge which through discussion resulted in a 'light bulb' moment and identification of potential solutions to improve performance and business continuity. The Level of Organisational Maturity seen means that the Council is in a positive place to push initiative forward. The Council is able to have honest conversations as evidenced by the great #TeamBreckland Culture.

There now feels a stronger emphasis on the customer with increased external focus.

The council has been proactive in making the necessary changes to positively impact the achievement of recommendations, for example examining the resource requirements to ensure the councils Breckland 2035 climate objectives are delivered. A new team will be in place from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 comprising of a project manager and an environmental and climate change officer. These changes were implemented to ensure there was more capacity for delivering the necessary actions at pace.

Peers were pleased to see a resident survey had been conducted, the first one for a number of years. The resident survey is providing a firm evidence base and informing decision-making. The resident's survey is a positive step towards ensuring the council makes a stronger connection between data, evidence and policy making.

The peer challenge identified the positive relationships of the Leader and Chief Executive externally. A programme of business and community visits has been developed and underway, as well as establishing a 'Future Breckland Board' which meets with political leadership, the community and representatives from the business sector. Peers discussed how building on these relationships will be important in providing an increased external focus, and building on the firm foundation of the organisation will ensuring Breckland Council has a strong influential voice within and outside the region.

## **Inspiring Communities**

The June 2022 peer challenge process identified the council's investment in the 'Inspiring Communities' programme was delivering considerable social value and providing the opportunity for long-term benefits to health and social care with cost avoidance within the broader health system. Peers made a number of

recommendations concerning sustainability of funding, strengthening performance measures, working with partners to share data to support improved identification of future need and further building on the positive relationships with the CCG.

Peers were pleased to learn the council was allocated £200k of UKSPF funding, part of an overall system investment of circa £900k. Peers see this as a strengthened position having originally been concerned over the sustainability of funding the programme beyond the initial investment made by the council. The examples shared with peers demonstrated the far reaching impact of the programme for example the investment in 200 mental health champions, 400 residents signed up to 'Silver Social', 600 food bus members and 40 families receiving young person's mental health wellbeing support. The programme now has strengthened performance dashboard and supporting social return on investment figures. The estimated system savings through prevention are an impressive estimated £1.8m annually.

The programme has developed considerably since the original brief three years ago when members set the objective to support the most vulnerable. The programme is now on a more sustainable footing with clear examples where realigning responsibility with partners has supported the attraction of external funding whilst reducing the amount of direct delivery from the council. These steps will support creation of capacity for other future new initiatives.

The council shared that data sharing agreements are in early stages of development and demonstrate a commitment to working together to further identify needs and those most vulnerable. Relationships with health and wellbeing partners are seen as very positive as the council aspires to play an active role in the integrated care system. Collaborating closely with partners has enabled further funding from the Integrated Care Board for a number of new and shared roles focused on specific health outcomes. Peers were pleased to learn how for example the community food bus is now working beyond its original objectives by addressing wider wellbeing needs such as skills and employment.

In summary peers were pleased to see how the council has responded to the report recommendations and now see the programme on a more sustainable footing with strong evidence of effective partnership working whilst recognising the council does not always have to have a direct delivery role, enabling others within the system to

take the lead. The Peer reviewed the work done by the Inspiring Communities Programme as exemplar and comment that the Council should be proud that it is leading the way.

## **Communications**

The peer challenge process identified a need to review the approach to communications. The council has made good initial progress with a review, examining national and local trends whilst drawing on learning and feedback from a recent resident's survey. The council has looked externally at other council's communication strategies to inform future strategy creation.

The council is in a strong position with internal communications with 91% of staff feeling trusted and empowered and 90% feeling part of the organisation. There is already a number of well-established communication channels such as regular newsletters, briefings, digital office signage and a growing use of video media.


Externally the council has evidenced through a recent resident's survey that 79% trust the council, which is higher than national statistics and locally amongst Norfolk residents. This is a great platform to further improve the relationship between the resident and the council through external communications. Peers identified that trust amongst residents provides the consent to operate and allow the council to do delivery further interventions that is important and valued by communities.

Peers shared their own experiences of communications, including how local external communications used a personalisation approach, detailing messaging and campaigns focusing on employee profiles, e.g. 'help Bryan keep your streets clean'.

Peers were informed of a new initiative, where staff who have a birthday in the current month meet in a group with the Chief Executive to discuss any aspect of their work or council business. An example shared with peers demonstrated the value in having open dialogue and responding to areas most concerning staff.

In summary, peers confirmed that the steps being taken to improve the effectiveness of internal and external communications was making progress and heading in a positive direction. The idea that the Customer team should be able to support social media queries was positively endorsed by the Peers. The LGA are able to further





support the council with a Communications Peer Challenge or arranging some bespoke peer support. During the peer discussion Breckland Council considered hosting a regional communications learning session supported by some peers from other regions and who can share their experience and learning using the sector led improvement approach.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Breckland Council for undertaking an LGA CPC progress review. The Council can be rightly proud of where it has been, where it has got to and its future direction of travel. We found on a visit a strong organisational maturity that means there is a strong platform from which to develop even further.

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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