


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Broxtowe Borough Council

7th-9th December 2022

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Broxtowe is a good council; many of the things it does are excellent (Green Futures, staff support and partnership working). It is an ambitious council, backing up that ambition with delivery (particularly investing in town centres) and is achieving more than expected of a district council. The approach to place shaping (regeneration, housing, infrastructure) is impressive.

Councillors, the Chief Executive and senior officers are committed and passionate about Broxtowe: the place, the council and the staff. Member/officer relations appear to be strong, constructive and well-developed. There is a sense from everyone the team met that Broxtowe cares about its staff.

Partners are engaged and enthusiastic about the council. Feedback was glowing; they can see that the council is making a difference, working with and through others. The positive engagement with the Combined Authority demonstrates the collaborative approach Broxtowe is known for.

Broxtowe has one of the most comprehensive approaches to carbon reduction that the team have seen. The passion shines through from councillors and officers, with buy in from critical service areas. The Green Futures Action Plan is well evidenced, well-presented and is already making a difference. There has been excellent work so far with great opportunities available to make further progress around diesel replacement, energy generation at the four key sites, and biodiversity

There are emerging risks around workforce, housing and medium-term financial planning but there is an opportunity to get ahead of these over the coming months and own (and plan for) the challenges corporately.

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: Enhance your approach to Medium-Term Financial Strategy planning

This is a pivotal moment for the council; Broxtowe is currently on a firm financial footing, but medium-term gaps are opening. The financial challenges for district

councils will remain over the long-term so the team recommend that comprehensive planning to 2025/26 should start now, with frank discussions with councillors after the elections in May 2023. This will need to be about priorities, balancing competing interests and the capacity for the council to deliver. Exploring opportunities to transform services will reduce need for cuts; early planning is recommended. Consider how to use existing data to drive decisions and identify critical data gaps.

2.2. Recommendation 2: Further develop the interplay between the Green Futures Climate Change Plan and the MTFS

The Green Futures Climate Change Strategy is genuinely impressive and well thought through and costed. Look at opportunities to reflect the investment requirements in capital MTFS and the HRA business plan, whilst delivering the Green Futures Programme so that a clearer pathway between resources and delivery is outlined. This will mean that resources will follow the strategy and trade-offs are drawn out. Consider how the council's approach to parking tariffs, which incentivises car use, fits with climate narrative and wider budget pressures.

2.3. Recommendation 3: Develop a comprehensive Workforce Strategy overseen and driven by General Management Team (GMT)

All councils face workforce challenges and pinch-points. The Council is responding but there's an opportunity to develop a more encompassing strategy covering short and long-term opportunities and a cross-cutting response to existing and emerging capacity gaps. Consider what type of employer Broxtowe wants to be, what's the offer to staff, and how it compares to other employers in the area as well as nearby councils. Explore further opportunities to 'grow your own' and use devolution to develop a county-wide approach.

2.4. Recommendation 4: Establish an officer-led Improvement Board for Housing repairs

The council is aware of problems in this area, which is why the peer team were asked to focus on this. There are a range of issues at play, including the high proportion of staff vacancies. The team recommend that Housing Repairs should be highlighted on the Corporate Risk Register, and improvement driven by officers at a senior level over the next twelve months. The improvement board would need

actions against the critical issues, for example, filling gaps in Health and Safety data and the approach to tenant involvement.

2.5. Recommendation 5: Explore ways to provide Cabinet with information on Corporate Risks.

This is not necessarily straightforward, as the most pressing corporate risks facing any council don't fit neatly into portfolio holders' responsibilities. GMT should work with Cabinet to explore ways of keeping Cabinet informed of corporate risks, without creating undue bureaucracy and duplication. Explore interplay between risks, the Corporate Plan and MTFs.

2.6. Recommendation 6: Review delegation arrangements.

Delegation arrangements should be reviewed to ensure that they remain up to date and appropriate for efficient decision-making. Increasing limits would allow Cabinet to focus on strategic issues and take pressure of officers in terms of the numbers of reports having to go to Cabinet for decisions. Consider alternative approach for councillors to share good news stories and funding announcements so that they have maximum reach.

2.7. Recommendation 7: Continue to embed the Cabinet and Scrutiny system.

Clarify role and focus of both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Policy Advisory Group to avoid duplication and ensure focus on priorities, with the work of these entities focused on the council's strategic challenges and opportunities.

2.8. Recommendation 8: Further analyse the staff survey responses

An overall response rate of 43% is around 20% lower than you should expect. Consider what more you can do to engage colleagues more, particularly those not based in the main office. There are some areas (such as managing change and staff feeling informed) are moving in the right direction but the numbers are still low. Explore why, perhaps through staff focus groups and other methods.

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 because of their relevant expertise. The team was:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Leader North Hertfordshire District Council
- Stephen Evans, Chief Executive, Norwich City Council
- Ben Lockwood, Deputy Chief Executive, Ashford Borough Council
- Cassandra Clements, Managing Director, East Suffolk Services
- Dr Alison Knight, Director of Place, Broxbourne Borough Council
- Ben Stoneman, Regional Programme Manager, One Public Estate
- Becca Singh, Regional Advisor, Local Government Association

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

Plus:

6. Environment and Climate Change
7. Housing

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 to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days on site at Broxtowe Borough Council, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to around 100 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

BBC has strong and passionate leadership from politicians and senior officers. The Corporate Plan has clear themes and priorities which demonstrates commitment to support the residents and businesses of Broxtowe, and the county more widely, prioritising vulnerable people.

There is an exciting level of ambition for town centre regeneration across the borough. This builds on successful Beeston investment and the Towns' Fund award for Stapleford. Broxtowe was recently awarded £16.5m from the Levelling Up Fund for Kimberley, although the £20m bid for Eastwood was not successful. The council will need to find ways of reviewing the Eastwood plans and finding alternative funding

mechanisms or resubmit in the next round. These bids, and the way they are delivered, demonstrate that the council is prioritising the needs of local residents and businesses in the north of the borough.

The work that the council does in the different towns should be communicated more widely. There is a sense from some that there is a 'north-south divide', and it is important that the council can demonstrate that it is working for all communities.

There was mixed feedback around use of Community Action Teams and the ability of the Council to actively listen to more distant wards such as Eastwood. Community engagement is conducted largely in different teams currently, and on specific issues. The devolution deal provides an opportunity to review BBC's approach to engagement and inclusion of local communities and residents. This may mean different approaches in different parts of the borough but reaching the same outcome.

4.2. Organisational and place leadership

The Council sees devolution as a potential opportunity to achieve Broxtowe's objectives. Although it knows it still needs to compete for the best deal for Broxtowe, it is seizing the opportunity to make things work with others. As an example, it is using the Broxtowe Partnership with Health, the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) and others to support both residents and staff during cost-of-living crisis. The team would like to commend BBC for establishing a hardship fund for staff to support them through this time, as well as setting up and publicising a borough-wide network of warm spaces.

There are some risks to organisational resilience though potential single points of failure and continuity planning should be put in place. This is with respect to senior officers and politicians, as well as specific service areas; housing and community safety were mentioned by several partners. All partners the team met spoke highly of the personal input from BBC staff, including senior officers, and the organisation is trusted.

Members are not fully aware of the Corporate Risks. Senior officers should work with councillors so that they understand and share responsibilities for key strategic risks. These risks are reported to the Audit Committee, but it is not clear what action

councillors take as a result. For example, does the Audit Committee Challenge officers and scrutinise specific risks? Are budgets revised to move resources to address key risks? This consideration also provides an opportunity to review how well the Cabinet and Scrutiny system is working, and identify any support needed by all political groups.

There is not a clear understanding of Broxtowe the place, the brand, the identity. There are four very different key towns in the borough, and there is an opportunity to embrace the diversity and be welcoming to all. There are clear differences between the North and South of the Borough, and this brings a richness to the overall place. The team suggest that the council considers how embracing diversity could be part of the vision and identity of Broxtowe.

A comprehensive Communications Strategy and annual plan would help to improve community engagement and campaigns. The team suggest that the Council resources additional work to map out communications requirements and consider how best to utilise staff, Members, Civic Mayor and other supporting partners to inform and to promote its activity. However, the Communications team is very small, although with plans to expand. Further communications expertise and resource will be needed to balance out efficiencies in other areas of work (for example, improving Member exposure, reducing pressure on staff in housing).

For example, maximising social media opportunities and considering different channels could target different sections of the population. This could prove an effective way for politicians to publicise achieved outcomes and cabinet decisions. It could also link to improving the capacity of the council by encouraging job applications from previously untapped parts of the community. Broxtowe may benefit from an LGA Communications Health Check to explore what additional resource and priorities could help.

The council has good relations with Liberty Leisure, the Teckal company running leisure services. Three councillors sit on the board, along with BBC's commercial manager. The council set up a shareholders' group to scrutinise board decisions. A change in structure has led to a management fee reduction; the team recommend a more open dialogue with LL on how that fee was reached. There is currently a project to replace the Bramcote leisure centre with a modernised, modular, energy

efficient centre. This could prove to be a model for other councils as a first in sustainable leisure centres. The team recommend this is considered (along with other capital programmes) in the MTFs and Green Futures Action Plan.

4.3. Governance and culture

Political leadership takes a collaborate and inclusive approach. The Leader is well liked and respected in political, community, business and partnership circles, including staff. Broxtowe is taking the Combined Authority as a real opportunity for councils to work together and make local authorities the employers of choice across the sub-region.

The council has recently moved to the Leader and Cabinet model of governance, partly as a result of the devolution agenda and ensuring that Broxtowe has a clear role in the Combined Authority. This new system will inevitably take time to bed in, but the Leader's collaborative approach helps to reassure members that may feel reluctant to embrace the system. There is confusion over the role and purpose of the Policy Action Group (PAG), with potential to duplicate the work of the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee. There are several ways to maximise the opportunities scrutiny functions offer; consider exploring the forward-looking role, with options for deep-dive enquiries on topics of community concern, or themes such as diversity and inclusion or healthy living. Clarifying the roles of O&S and the PAG will help ensure maximum member engagement.

Structures are in place to include opposition Councillors in Cabinet meetings, although the team heard that this is seldom taken up. There are opportunities for opposition members to get more involved in council decision-making, for example establishing a shadow cabinet, attending cabinet, actively engaging in Scrutiny function. LGA Leadership Essentials and Leadership Academy courses are available to opposition members and could encourage them to fulfil their important political role.

Attendance at Member development and training is varied, and councillors do not always see the benefits, particularly if they have been councillors for many years. However, local government is an ever-changing landscape and the team suggest establishing a continuous series of workshops and/or briefings for all councillors, to ensure they are always equipped with the best possible knowledge to help them

make better decisions. Look for opportunities, perhaps on the back of the next local elections, to enhance Member training and development to make it engaging and relevant.

4.4. Financial planning and management

Broxtowe Borough Council is generally well-run with a strong platform to face the oncoming challenges. The financial reporting shared with the team present the council in a positive light; the audit reports show that the council is financially well run with a reasonably strong balance sheet for its size.

The Council is using its balance sheet to support its communities, with investment with the town centre and its regeneration of the cinema area which it is rightfully proud of. Broxtowe should be given credit for letting all the food and beverage outlets at the new cinema complex at a time when the larger chains are struggling with their business model. Broxtowe has bucked the trend.

This theme is continued with the various funding bids and programs that are being run that represent a significant investment into the fabric of the council's buildings. The investment in the crematorium is a very creative project providing a valuable service and commercial income. The leisure centre project is one that has the potential to provide a template for a sustainable leisure facility. If Broxtowe can deliver on these ambitions, it will have shaped the Borough well.

Broxtowe's Medium Term Financial Plan outlines the scale of the problem faced by the council. This is by no means an outlier and the scale of the problem is like that faced by many borough and district authorities. Work has been done to address some of the gap for 2023/24. There is widespread awareness that 2022 has changed the outlook for the sector and that all councils face a challenging financial environment.

Finance is generally well integrated into the business planning process with investment appraisals. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy shows gaps opening in later years. Broxtowe should start planning now for what will be coming in the next few years. Current political redlines are clear but make the budgeting process more difficult; some may need to be revisited after the next local election.

Broxtowe is doing a considerable amount of work on carbon capture and biodiversity

net gain. This could be monetarised. Selling credits to developers might unlock new revenue streams that could be reinvested in the Green Futures programme.

There has been some concern over the regularity of financial reporting to councillors; as the new governance system settles this should be resolved. Reports to members are clearly presented and explain the financial issues well. The audit and governance processes are robust.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

Staff are committed and caring, and value the terms and conditions and opportunities for learning and development. The council invests in staff, supporting professional development and talent spotting. Staff appreciate benefits available to them from the organisation, which created a sense of employee loyalty. It is notable that although staff do move away to other organisations that pay more, there are many examples of where they return to Broxtowe because of the culture and opportunities it provides. There are several examples of apprenticeships leading to employment, leading to permanent contracts and career development.

There are particularly high vacancies in some services and BBC is exploring pay scales and supplements. The team heard that its pay is less than other councils' and recommend finding out how accurate this is, including comparing Terms and Conditions across councils and other employers if possible. The culture of the organisation may be its selling point rather than its wages; if so, consider how this can best be communicated in a campaign to address vacancies. What is the overall offer? A more comprehensive Workforce Strategy could tackle short- and long-term challenges, looking at succession planning, flexible working, holiday buy back, and what other employee benefits could be provided. Acknowledging and setting in motion plans for tackling staff vacancies, use of interims, market supplements, would demonstrate strong organisational leadership to all levels of staff.

Staff are not always clear about the council's approach to flexible working. There is some resentment about managers' discretion, particularly when different teams work in different ways. It's important to clarify what's expected and what's possible, and for all staff to remember that when people are working from home, they are still working and can be contacted just as much as when they are in the office. The intention had been to be empowering and encouraging, but clearer instruction may

work better at this stage.

The team heard much positive feedback about General Management Team (GMT), the Chief Executive and councillors as well as the culture in the council. However, the staff at Kimberley depot feel undervalued and isolated from the rest of the Council. The peer team heard examples of where tools or systems to improve efficiency for different staff met with resistance. This includes mobile technology designed to streamline Housing Management and Economic Development staff not being connected to the council network or tools and equipment not being used effectively. . The staff survey was inconsistent. Whilst there were many positive remarks, the low response rate and some of the answers highlight potential for improvement. Consider improving internal communications about the anonymity of surveys and find alternative ways to contribute such as focus groups using workshop methods. Be clear with staff what staff engagement is for and demonstrate how staff input can lead to concrete changes.

4.6. Climate Change and Environment

There is a truly organisational response to the climate emergency, with a real passion shown from Members and officers at all levels of the organisation. There is clear integrity in the approach the council has taken to establish baseline data by working with the Carbon Trust. The council should maximise the communications on what it is doing on this agenda, particularly when outcomes can't easily be demonstrated in performance management measures.

There is excellent long-term planning, particularly in working on offset projects that will take several years to be established. Carbon reduction is being explored in both Planning and using the HRA. This lends greater credibility to the strategy, helps with funding, and councillors will better understand about the impact of decisions on one part of the council (for example car parking charges) on the Green Futures outcomes.

The Green Rewards scheme is an excellent low-cost option to encourage public behaviour change. Broxtowe should be commended for establishing this scheme, and for encouraging other councils in the County to adopt it. The Devolution deal may provide an opportunity for sharing it more widely. This could be an income generator for any Council to support climate behaviour change and BBC could use

the income to create an environment reserve for re-investment.

The Green Futures programme has 145 actions on it. The team suggest that these are prioritised and costed (as far as possible) with proposed funding sources considered. Identify who should be responsible for the delivery of the priorities and bring the programme into alignment with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The team recommends prioritising the highest emitters (buildings, fleet and utilities). In addition, the team suggests commissioning data collection on trees and habitats to properly inform BBC's biodiversity aspirations. This will help to target resources to areas of most need and most value.

Strongly consider Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) as an alternative to diesel. The council has researched and determined that switching to electric is not affordable and hydrogen is too far away. In comparison, while HVO cost has increased, its environmental value and affordability against other options still makes it viable and helps feed into the cyclical economy. It is likely that it will be a medium to long term decision due to the factors surrounding electric and Hydrogen.

4.7. Housing

Housing is a big challenge for all housing authorities. The Social Housing White Paper puts more power in the hands of tenants, the regulator has been given more powers, and councils are under the spotlight. The White Paper's recommendations need to be reviewed and action taken where needed.

There is a clear ambition to build more affordable homes for local people and a Homes England grant of £1.5m has been secured. There are several examples of where services are performing well, for example budgeting support and rent arrears. Arrears are at a low level however given the cost-of-living crisis, welfare support and continuing and debt recovery will remain priorities.

There appears to be a good communications strategy in place for Housing which includes newsletters, meeting residents in their localities (with attendance averaging 25-30 people per meeting), a private Facebook page for tenants, and a Resident Involvement Group (RIG) which assesses performance and is now focusing in on complaints.

But Housing Repairs has emerged as the council's biggest service risk. Almost a

third of the roles in this section are unfilled, which creates a huge pressure on the remaining staff. This is causing concerns for other departments, such as Customer Services and Independent Living. There are currently 20 disrepair complaints cases with the legal team and a full-time solicitor has been brought in to deal specifically with these cases.

Staff in Housing Repairs report feeling positive that they have been moved back into Housing, but morale and motivation has taken a hit through management and structural changes as well as staff vacancies. In addition, key improvements that were identified when it initially moved to Assets have not all been completed.

Homelessness is a key rising concern with high numbers of people being placed in Bed and Breakfast. This is partly linked to void delays, which in turn is partly linked to delays in Housing Repairs. There are also some gaps in Health and Safety compliance data. Safety stats need to be brought together and reported to Cabinet regularly (gas/electric/lifts/asbestos/damp and mould etc.).

The team recommend that an officer-led Housing Repairs Improvement Board is established, which focuses on delivering key actions quickly. The peer team suggest that this is chaired by the Chief Executive and include other senior officers to own the challenge corporately to drive forward progress.

5. Next steps

The LGA recognises that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in 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, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for the East Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

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