




LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Blaby District Council

Wednesday 14 December 2022

Feedback





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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) from Tuesday 22 to Friday 25 March 2022 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the CPC 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 peers' reflections on any new opportunities, challenges or support needs that may have arisen since the peer team undertook the CPC
- discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank Blaby District Council (DC) for their commitment to sector support. 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

This progress review took place onsite at Blaby DC over nine hours on Wednesday 14 December 2022 and focussed on each of the recommendations from Blaby DC's previous CPC:

1. Develop and lead a long-term vision for Blaby as a place/district with partners – the council's corporate plan, the Blaby District Plan 2021-24, outlines its priorities and contribution to the district but there is no wider long-term district vision beyond strategic growth. The council has a clear opportunity to lead such a vision to align council resources and projects with partners.
2. Review the council's corporate plan to drive the council and its priorities forward, post pandemic – the current plan runs from 2021 to 2024 but many external factors have already changed, eg in terms of the pandemic and the cost of living. Alongside the Chief Executive settling into her role since joining the council in

November 2021, now is a timely opportunity to review the plan to drive the council's work further forward.

3. Develop a corporate performance management framework, including service plans and personal appraisals – Blaby DC has not had such a framework since before the pandemic. Various council teams therefore do not reliably know how they have performed, to time or target, as part of a clear 'golden thread' - from corporate, service to individual staff priorities. This is holding back the council's ability to drive change and improvement and needs addressing as soon as possible. This will ensure the council's resources are best focused to deliver the corporate plan's priorities.
4. Develop an overall delivery/business plan, including targets, building on your Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and other plans, to address local government financial challenges – the council is undertaking various financial work strands. Developing such an overall delivery/business plan will ensure these different work strands complement each other and avoid duplication, overlap and conflicts. It will also help address the wider local government financial challenges affecting the council.
5. Define what transformation means to the council and any consequent organisational change required - the council is developing an approach to transformation and already recognises the need to clarify what it means. This will need owning and driving by cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with service teams and other members to ensure everyone fully understands, supports and delivers the plan to best progress the council's work. As part of this, the council should focus on its enabling services, eg human resources (HR), organisational development (OD, information communications and technology (ICT), and communications, to ensure sufficient focus and capacity towards transformation.
6. Define what commerciality will mean for the council, and challenge members' and officers' appetite for risk - there is currently a lack of clarity of what commerciality is and how ambitious the council should be in this respect. There is similarly no common agreement of commercial risk appetite within the council. Blaby DC

therefore needs to reconcile these different views to form a clear agreement, on which to base its overall approach.

7. Use communications to full effect throughout the council, eg to best engage with customers, promote your achievements and services, etc - there is much potential within this function if it can deploy external support. Such opportunities include: more consultation with stakeholders to inform decision making, non-digital communications to help those with limited access to digital services, and more one to one access to services through council buildings and enhanced telephone services for those with specific questions or needs. The LGA's communications support offer can help review the communications approach to assist all this.
8. Review and refresh the scrutiny function - the Scrutiny Commission is not as effective as it could be. The council should therefore thoroughly review its scrutiny function to explore and address its strengths and areas to improve so that it works to full effect. The LGA and Centre for Governance and Scrutiny can assist with this in various ways.

The following members of the original CPC team were involved in this review:

- Jack Hegarty, former Joint Chief Executive, Malvern Hills and Wychavon DCs
- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of the Council, Breckland Council
- Karen Sly, Finance Director, Great Yarmouth Borough Council
- Heather Greenan, Director of Policy, Insight and Communications, Derby City Council
- Vicki Goddard, Progress Review Manager, LGA.

The peer team had discussions with the following representatives from the council:

- Cllr Terry Richardson - Council Leader
- Cllr Maggie Wright, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder
- Cllr Ben Taylor, Portfolio Holder
- Cllr Roy Denney, Scrutiny Member
- Julia Smith - Chief Executive
- John Richardson - Strategic Director

- Sarah Pennelli - Strategic Director
- Teresa Neal, Group Manager - Business, Partnerships & Health Improvement
- Caroline Harbour - Group Manager, Environmental, Housing & Community Services
- Louisa Horton, Group Manager - Corporate Services
- Nick Brown, Group Manager - Finance & Income
- Lisa Boland, Group Manager - Transformation & Customer Services
- Tiffany Back, Transformation & Projects Service Manager
- Julie Hutchinson, Communications Service Manager
- Luke Clements, Performance and Information Service Manager

3. Progress Review - Feedback

General comments overall

Blaby DC is clearly committed to addressing all the CPC's recommendations and has made excellent progress in doing so. This is all the more impressive, given that the council, like others, is responding to the ongoing challenging, economic environment.

Blaby DC should continue to identify, progress and make the most of linkages between the recommendations so they best align with one another. There is a lot of financial synergy for example between Recommendations 4, 5 and 6. Making the most of such linkages will reduce any duplication of work and related costs, and strengthen links, relationships, work and opportunities between teams – both within the council and with external partners. This includes linking Blaby DC's corporate and service team financial and service planning to its plans for transformation and commerciality. **The council should also ensure its corporate functions such as ICT, HR and communications support all council teams to best effect.**

Some key work, such as refreshing the council's corporate/district plan, is being effectively paused until after the May 2023 local elections. This is understandable, as politicians will naturally focus on the elections. Any potential change to Blaby DC's political administration could also change the direction of such plans that limited

resources had already been spent on. **These pauses carry risks however, which Blaby DC need to be aware of and take ownership of.** Much could change in the five months before the elections, time in which the council could have otherwise proactively responded to and prevented potential problems.

Blaby DC is aware of the serious ICT problems that affect its staff's and members' ability daily to work efficiently and effectively. With a new cloud-based performance management system going live from February 2023 however, and a developing transformation agenda that will seek to further use technology, **the council needs to address these ICT issues urgently.** This will ensure all council colleagues work to full effect, and will help prevent the new systems creating further difficulties.

There is good evidence of the council's continuing positive relationships with Leicestershire DCs, East Midlands Councils and others. **Blaby DC should continue this work to make the most of everyone's resources and opportunities.**

Recommendations 1 and 2 - develop and lead a long-term vision for Blaby as a place/district with partners, and review the council's corporate plan to drive the council and its priorities forward, post pandemic

Blaby DC has a narrative and plans in place to develop a long-term vision for the district with partners, and to review its corporate/district plan after the May 2023 local elections. As mentioned above however, such delays bring associated risks. **Blaby DC should therefore develop its longer-term vision for the district, and review its corporate plan, as soon as possible after the May 2023 local elections.** This will prevent further time and momentum being lost, whilst making the most of latest information and developments that may need consideration or responding to. **The council should keep these documents 'live'** so they can be amended as required in these challenging and changing times.

Meanwhile, Blaby DC is undertaking a range of new, proactive work to address the immediate, on-going issues its residents are facing in light of the cost of living crisis. This includes its detailed, evidenced plans to address current community, safety, health – including mental health, wellbeing, housing and homelessness issues, the council's ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030, and the district to be so by 2050.

Blaby DC needs to ensure these latest plans align with one another, with other existing plans and strategies, and the developing vision for the district and the refreshed corporate plan. This is not only for the reasons outlined in the 'General comments overall' section above. It is also because as additional plans, they could divert focus in various ways from the council's currently strong, key priorities, which are outlined in more detail under Recommendation 5.

Strong alignment of all these plans will also help Blaby DC negotiate best use of its own and partners' roles and resources. This includes Leicestershire county, city, borough and district councils' Chief Executives and Leaders/Mayor, and providers.

Recommendation 3 - develop a corporate performance management framework, including service plans and personal appraisals

Blaby DC has undertaken much positive work in this area, led by its current Performance and Information Service manager who was recruited after the previous CPC. The work includes engaging positively with group and service managers, their teams, and SLT, to set up and introduce comprehensive service planning, performance measurement and management processes, and working with members so they best inform council improvement. The new transformation team, mentioned further under Recommendation 5, is also playing a key supporting and facilitative role. This is to ensure all council teams take responsibility for their own transformation as part of their service planning and performance management.

Blaby DC's new cloud-based performance measurement and management system will go 'live' from February 2023. Time will therefore be needed to thoroughly embed the performance approach throughout the council.

More up to date and real time data through the new system will offer additional opportunities, especially for members, to analyse, respond to and plan service and performance issues. Data trends however will naturally take time to emerge, as more information is regularly inputted into the system, and analysis informs the narrative on each work area. **Members and officers will need to review, develop and benchmark their metrics and targets** (particularly those focused on outcomes) **at the earliest opportunity** so they best relate to corporate priorities, are meaningful and useful, and do not become an industry in themselves.

Recommendation 4 - develop an overall delivery/business plan, including targets, building on your MTFS and other plans, to address local government financial challenges

Like many a council, Blaby DC is making systematic progress in identifying ways of closing its financial deficit. The council is not ruling anything out; nothing is 'off the table'. **Blaby DC needs however to decide as soon as possible what is definitely 'on the table'** - longer and shorter term - through Blaby DC's 2023/24 budget setting process to ensure it addresses the deficit. **The council should also monitor and further plan its current and future reserves**, especially in these uncertain times when anything could happen quickly, and require financing, at any time.

The council's open spaces and asset reviews, and planning their related next steps, will further inform Blaby DC's financial plans. **The council should therefore progress these reviews at the earliest opportunity**, especially given related transformation opportunities, such as using space and technology more effectively.

Blaby DC will need to further financial plan, especially longer-term, once it has an agreed vision for the district and a revised corporate/district plan, to ensure funding is allocated to those related activities and services.

The peer team also strongly recommends that Blaby DC revisits this original recommendation to develop an overall business/delivery plan to address all its financial challenges. This will help ensure all the council's work on its finances is co-ordinated, aligns with relevant plans, and makes the most of resources. This includes addressing the council's immediate financial deficit, any MTFS issues, managing its finances generally, and incorporating any new transformation, commerciality, asset review and planning, and other working practices. **This should be an early priority after the May 2023 elections with a clear business strategy aligned to the refreshed corporate plan.** The inclusion of efficiencies, savings and income targets to be delivered over a four-year time frame should be considered.

Recommendation 5 - define what transformation means to the council and any consequent organisational change required

The council's 'Transforming Blaby Together' strapline and work provides a good, initial definition of transformation¹ to test out and develop further with staff. It also

helps ensure transformation is core to, and supports, everything the council does, throughout its plans, strategies, and through the council's fundamental support services and commitments. These include: transforming performance management, HR and ICT services, the workplace, and embedding carbon neutrality – as underpinned by Blaby DC's vision, values, priorities and annual plan.

This positive, initial work is being led by a recently recruited new transformation team. Whilst it remains early days, their supportive, facilitative and collaborative approach is starting to enable all council teams, SLT and all members, including cabinet and the portfolio holder for transformation, to take responsibility for, and own this agenda.

Blaby DC should continue to align its developing transformation work with other strategic goals and plans across and beyond the council, so it works as effectively and efficiently as possible. This in turn could also help with the financial challenges facing the council. This includes further working with, and learning from partners seeking to transform their services with limited resources, particularly to deliver the longer-term vision for the district and any shared objectives.

The council should also make the most of opportunities provided through the recent review of its HR function. This includes developing a council-wide, strategic OD strategy to ensure staff and members are best equipped and skilled to deliver Blaby DC's latest agenda such as commerciality and transformation.

Recommendation 6 - define what commerciality will mean for the council, and challenge members' and officers' appetite for risk

The council recently recruited a Strategic Director from Charnwood Borough Council with significant commercial expertise on a part-time, shared basis. He sits on Blaby DC's SLT, works with members, and supports and facilitates Blaby DC's teams to progress and own this agenda. This includes for example organising a training programme for service managers to consider and develop commercial ideas into business cases and plans. He is facilitating work towards a council-wide agreement on a set of commercial principles to steer the direction and planning of this work. Blaby DC has also delegated him authority to consider and respond to potential property purchases quickly, so such opportunities are not lost. Such work is already increasing members' confidence in making commercial decisions. It is also

enhancing strategic and operational relationships and joint working between the two councils, through networking and constructive challenge.

As this work progresses, it will need time to embed throughout the council. As part of this, **Blaby DC should develop opportunities from reviewing Blaby DC's open spaces and other assets, and update the council's asset management plan accordingly.** In doing so, the council should benefit from related outcomes, such as further inward investment, income and efficiencies, recognising that this is all in the context of the continuously changing financial and economic climate.

Recommendation 7 - use communications to full effect throughout the council, eg to best engage with customers, promote your achievements, services, etc

Given its suggested LGA health check of Blaby DC's communication function took place in November 2022, the peer team recognised there was a limit to what the council could otherwise do relating to this recommendation by the time of this review.

The health check does however put the council in good stead to address the issues raised, and improve the service to best support all the council's communications. Recommendations include for example **the council reviewing the communications service plan after the refresh of the corporate plan** to ensure it is as fit for purpose as possible, **structuring the team accordingly, developing a council communications strategy, and surveying staff to establish how they would best like to be communicated with.**

Meanwhile, in observing the well-attended all staff Blaby Matters webinar, including contributions from the Leader and Chief Executive, **the peer team suggests the council creates more opportunities for staff to ask questions and provide feedback** to make the most of such participation levels, depending on how this forum normally operates. Questions could for example be invited before, during and after the sessions, with the answers shared with all staff. This could form part of a wider staff engagement approach which helps to inform and shape the transformation programme going forward.

Recommendation 8 - review and refresh the scrutiny function

Blaby DC's commissioning of an external, independent consultant to review its scrutiny function has put it in a good position to progress this agenda, including:

- a refreshed approach to task and finish groups so reviews on identified issues are clearly scoped, with specified outcomes, using members with the most appropriate skills and knowledge, to be as effective as possible
- an agreed member induction programme including scrutiny training after the local elections
- working with the East Midlands Councils scrutiny network
- the appointment of a new Democracy Support Officer with a specific research role; this will particularly provide independence from members whilst progressing work they commission, including with relevant partners where useful to do so
- an emerging positive perception of scrutiny, so it is seen as a helpful, necessary and healthy check and balance of council activity.

Blaby DC should continue to develop this work to strengthen the scrutiny function and the opportunities it offers.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Blaby DC 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 support, there is an on-going support offer 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.

Mark Edgell (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and their e-mail address is mark.edgell@local.gov.uk.

¹ Including working smarter, delivering differently, learning from others, tailoring services, integrated technology and continuous improvement.