


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council

7th - 10th November 2022

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council (BDBC) is an ambitious council, with a legacy of strong financial management and is providing good quality services for its residents.

BDBC has experienced recent political and managerial change. The current Leader took on the position in February 2022, having previously served as the Deputy Leader. The council also has a relatively new Chief Executive, who joined in January 2021. The peer team heard the positive impact both have had on the organisation, hearing frequently remarks about how visible and approachable they both are.

It was clear during the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) that BDBC is a driven council that has a strong desire for achievement and delivery, with passionate officers, members and partners. The talent and commitment to BDBC by officers in particular was notable, which is something that is recognised by members: *"the staff are amazing here"*.

The financial position of the authority is commendably stable and solid. Finances are effectively managed, and the importance of sound financial management is recognised throughout the organisation. The strong base the financial position affords the council provides it with the ability to invest in priority areas.

Key local partners enjoy working with BDBC, and they value the importance the council places on effective partnership working. The council has many compelling stories to tell about what it has achieved in partnership and it should ensure it celebrates this both internally and externally.

BDBC last had a CPC in December 2013. At that point, the culture of the organisation was highlighted as an area which required significant improvement. During this CPC, the peer team experienced and heard from officers and members a very different culture to that which was commented on in 2013. The culture that was described to the peer team consistently was one which was welcoming and inclusive. Significant pride should be taken for the efforts to move the council forward in this area. This said, work to maintain and continually improve the culture is still required as some respondents told the team the organisation is quite siloed in certain areas. This is seen as an impediment to effective team working.

Resident satisfaction with the local area, satisfaction with the council and belief the council provides value for money are consistently high and above both the regional and national average¹.

BDBC is in the process of developing a new council plan, a draft of which was shared with the peer team. The ambitions within this new plan were notable and demonstrate the strong place narrative the council is developing. It was good to see the priorities set out in the plan limited to high level focused aims. The peer team would encourage the council to ensure that the actions and strategies which sit beneath the council plan to be equally prioritised to ensure delivery.

Difficult political decisions will be required to realise the ambitions set out in the council plan. A planned and realistic approach for how to address and deliver these in areas such as the council's housing supply and climate change aspirations is needed.

BDBC continues to demonstrate strong place leader credentials, and there are opportunities to influence place in a broader context. The peer team would encourage the council to seek to collaborate more regionally and adopt this place leader role beyond the borders of the borough.

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

Actions that sit beneath the draft council plan should be clearly prioritised, reflecting the most important ambitions.

2.2. Recommendation 2

Be clear that the council's emerging actions reflect the outcomes BDBC is

¹ M.E.L research, between June and August 2022. Information taken from the draft council plan Cabinet report – 8 November 2022:

<https://democracy.basingstoke.gov.uk/documents/s29715/Appendix%201-%20Draft%20Council%20Plan%20-%20October%202022.pdf>

seeking to achieve. For example, the decisions being taken to achieve the net zero ambition and the local demand for homes.

2.3. Recommendation 3

Develop a planned approach to tackle the more difficult political decisions and risks that need to be taken to deliver the priorities set out in the council plan.

2.4. Recommendation 4

Key performance indicators should be refined to reflect the priorities in the draft council plan and ensure that these are meaningful and measurable. The process for reporting performance needs to be simplified giving clearer lines of accountability.

2.5. Recommendation 5

Consider how the council can collaborate more regionally to support the delivery of the council's priorities with a particular focus at a county level.

2.6. Recommendation 6

Review the options from the constitutional review specific to the scrutiny and policy committees' structure and function.

2.7. Recommendation 7

Review and rationalise the member bodies within the governance framework.

2.8. Recommendation 8

The refreshed people strategy should continue to embed the culture changes and address challenges of siloes that have been identified.

2.9. Recommendation 9

Continue the strong financial governance in place whilst considering how to use the council's resources to drive priorities.

2.10. Recommendation 10

Align the policy, performance, organisational development, human resources and change functions. Given the strategic importance this should report to the

Chief Executive.

2.11. Recommendation 11

Ensure capacity exists to deliver major projects for the longer-term success of the project.

2.12. Recommendation 12

Use the new census data to review the equality, diversity and inclusion objectives for the council and the borough.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Lead Peer: Wallace Sampson OBE, Chief Executive, Harrogate Borough Council
- Conservative Member Peer: Cllr Linda Haysey, Leader, East Herts District Council
- Labour Member Peer: Cllr Victoria Cusworth, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
- Officer Peer: Garry Cummings, Director of Finance, Development and Regeneration and Deputy Managing Director, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
- Officer Peer: Lucie Breadman, Strategic Director, Colchester City Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager: Harry Parker

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?

In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide observations and feedback in relation to the development of BDBC's new council plan and the functioning of the council's scrutiny committees.

3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite at BDBC, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 50 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 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

Basingstoke and Deane is a large borough of 245 square miles in the north of Hampshire with an estimated population of 185,000. It borders West Berkshire in the north, and four Hampshire districts – Hart, East Hampshire, Winchester and Test Valley. The town centre of Basingstoke is the focal point for the borough, an attractive retail destination with the shopping centres of Festival Place and The Malls. The borough is host to important cultural and arts venues, such as The Anvil, The Haymarket and Milestones Living History Museum. All of which play an important role in contributing to both the local economy, sense of pride and health and wellbeing of communities.

BDBC is developing its new council plan and as part of the CPC the council asked the peer team to review the ambitions and see whether the priorities resonate with officers, members and partners.

The peer team felt the overall priorities set out in the draft council plan were ambitious, concise and strategic. The peer team were pleased to see positive exercises like the Corporate Indicators Scorecard, Gold/Silver/Bronze service assessment and the 'Key Principles for How We Work', feed into the development of the plan.

The priority of being '*a borough where the environment can flourish*' is notable. The council can demonstrate progress on delivering this ambition through the significant resourcing that has been put into the climate change team. This includes the planned additional staffing being brought in here, with a 'green team' supporting residents with energy saving and other sustainable issues. The building blocks are in place to do some great things.

When speaking to officers, members and partners they broadly recognised the priorities from the draft council plan. They universally welcomed their early

involvement in the development of the plan. It was felt that this was a collaborative exercise looking to provide a shared purpose and goals for Basingstoke and Deane as a borough, not just the council.

Whilst the peer team welcomed the strategic nature to the priorities within the draft plan, we would encourage the council to ensure that the considerable number of actions and strategies that sit beneath it are suitably prioritised. It is important that there is an understanding of what is at the top of the 'must happen' list. Equally it is necessary that the aspirations within the council plan align with other strategies and activity. For example, within the draft plan the council sets out that:

“We must increase the amount that is reused or recycled in the borough and reduce waste. We recognise that currently our recycling and waste services are not good enough and don't meet the high standards of service our residents deserve. One of our key areas of focus will be to improve them.”

If the council is to significantly improve recycling rates, a decision will be required on how this is to be achieved, particularly in terms of the frequency of waste and recycling collection.

A further example where the peer team would encourage the council to ensure there is alignment between ambitions within the council plan and other strategies would be with regards to the council's plans for new homes. The council told the peer team that it is an imperative to ensure there are suitable housing numbers to meet the local housing need, including on affordable housing. The council were clear that it will seek to meet this need in an appropriate and sustainable way which is not to the detriment of the borough's communities and environment.

BDBC has a housing waiting list of more than 4,500. The borough also has significant population growth estimates for the next 10-20 years. Current plans are for 300 new affordable homes to be built per annum. The council is in the process of updating its local plan, it is important that careful consideration is given to ensure alignment between this, the housing and homelessness strategy and BDBC's ambition for new homes.

To achieve the particularly ambitious target of the council being net zero by 2025 and as a borough by 2030, BDBC will need to actively review its car parking strategy and make progress to become a truly 'paperless' organisation.

These examples illustrate that difficult political decisions will be required for BDBC to realise and lead the ambitions set out in the draft council plan.

The development of the corporate performance framework is positive. It is recognised across the council the need for this to be refined in line with the new council plan, to enable delivery of the priorities and ensure these are tracked and scrutinised.

The council's performance data is reported quarterly to the Senior Leadership Team, Cabinet briefing, Performance Panel (intended from January 2023) and the Scrutiny Committee. There are several reporting routes here. To avoid repetition and ensure worthwhile outputs are generated, specific roles and responsibilities of the different bodies that review the data should be made clearer. The peer team felt that it is important that when the data is being reported to these bodies relevant Heads of Service and Managers should be the ones presenting the information as they are the accountable individuals.

The council has commendable ambition for the masterplanning of Basingstoke town centre, Basing View and the leisure park, all of which are important to deliver the council's growth and inward investment plans. The council, though, has in the past, at times, experienced delays on some major projects. Going forward it is important the project teams are properly resourced and prioritised with the necessary expertise.

4.2. Organisational and place leadership

The council benefits from a strong and established partnership between the Leader and Chief Executive. The approachableness and visibility of both was consistently commented on throughout the CPC. The peer team were informed of positive relationships between Cabinet and senior management, with good examples of collective leadership demonstrated.

There was also a recognition of the increasing leadership role the Leader has looked to take on sub-regionally. An example of which was his selection to join the newly formed Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board (ICB), providing the perspective of borough and district councils as the only elected member on the ICB.

The way in which the council led the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic is

recognised by members, officers and partners. The council's strength in partnership working was exemplified during this time. BDBC enabled local partners to step up and support the community, a good example was the marketplace for businesses to digitise during the pandemic.

Partnership working is a strength of BDBC, something that is recognised externally. A council partner the peer team spoke to described BDBC as: *"amongst the very best [local authority] we work with."* Impressive outcomes have been achieved in partnership. An example of this is the innovative Social Inclusion Partnership that has achieved notable success in reducing annual rough sleeping estimates from 26 in 2016/17 to just two in 2021/22.

The peer team heard positive stories of the council as a funder and as an enabler of local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. Good practice can be demonstrated with the co-development of performance reporting requirements with organisations BDBC funds, working collectively to identify synergies between the council's plan and priorities and VCS organisations' own business plans. The peer team also heard from some VCS organisations that they had received multiyear funding from the council, which has given them financial security and enabled longer-term planning.

The peer team saw evidence of a positive place narrative being developed. Partners could see this too and commended the leadership and co-ordinating role BDBC takes on. Whilst being a strong voice for Basingstoke and Deane is important, the peer team would encourage the council to take on an increasing leading role across the region. There are some examples of the council doing this, such as the recent commissioning of the North Hampshire Economic Assessment. BDBC's strong financial position can enable the council to take on this leadership role in the sub region, developing further opportunities for collaboration. This is particularly important when looking at regeneration and infrastructure opportunities, working at a pan-Hampshire level.

Basingstoke and Deane's strategic location and attraction to inward investment puts it in a good position to achieve its economic development aspirations. BDBC has strong place leadership credentials which can be evidenced with the Basing View site and the positive relationship with the Local Enterprise Partnership. The council has

significant ambition in this space with the exploration of a potential university campus in the town as well as attracting and retaining large private sector organisations.

The council can evidence its infrastructure challenges and the impact this has on achieving growth. Collaboration is key to addressing some of the challenges and it is crucial that the closer working relationships are maintained and strengthened with Hampshire County Council (HCC). There are several opportunities here, the peer team feel it is important and suggest that the council works with HCC to actively seek to understand better the respective ambitions, challenges and complexities for both authorities.

Resident satisfaction with the council (75 per cent) is considerably higher than both the regional (62 per cent) and national (62 per cent) average. This is something which the council should be proud of. Other attitudes that were tested during the residents' survey also came out above average in areas such as satisfaction in the local area and belief the council provides value for money. The survey did though highlight some areas for improvement. For example, on residents feeling informed about the services and benefits provided by the council – only 49 per cent felt informed – compared to the regional average of 60 per cent. With 22 per cent of respondents saying they have no access to a computer; work is required to continue to support people who are digitally isolated.

The borough of Basingstoke and Deane has significant diversity of place, with a considerable proportion of residents – 36 per cent – rurally based. BDBC is aware of the challenges this can raise including reaching a dispersed population where often there are pockets of deprivation. When speaking to the VCS they described some residents from rural areas feeling forgotten about, and highlighted transport connection as a major issue. It is important the council strengthens its access points to reach residents across the borough.

4.3. Governance and culture

The council has undertaken work on a number of key governance processes. This includes the adoption of the CIPFA Local Code of Corporate Governance and the development of the protocol for councillor and officer relations.

Through many discussions whilst on site it was evident to the peer team that the council is committed to effective scrutiny. Progress has been made with the new scrutiny protocol, training programme, the appointment of a dedicated scrutiny officer and a forward plan. The adoption of a protocol is good practice as is the commitment that: *“on a quarterly basis the committees will, by way of a tracker, monitor progress of each [scrutiny] recommendation, with updates provided by the relevant officers.”* The peer team also heard good examples of where scrutiny has been useful mechanism for instance the scrutinising of the waste contract.

The progress that has been made to strengthen the scrutiny and policy committees is evident. This said though, the peer team did hear that: *“scrutiny does not have a clear and distinct role”*. The peer team would encourage the council to continue its review of the council’s governance structure with a focus on providing defined purpose and clarity as to roles and responsibilities.

All scrutiny members were offered training from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny in June 2022, and this is positive. Further development should be explored for lead scrutiny members, such as committee chairs and vice-chairs. This could include political mentoring and the LGA’s [Leadership Essentials programme](#).

The peer team identified areas for improvement with the council’s governance system. The current board and member advisory panel structure is confusing, roles and responsibilities are not wholly understood. This causes uncertainty on where decisions should be taken. There are boards and member advisory panels in the governance system which are not a part of the constitutional framework. For transparency purposes boards and panels which make up the council’s governance system should be included within the constitution. This would be good practice, even when these boards are not decision-making bodies.

The ongoing constitutional review was positive and was seen as an open and collaborative exercise by members. This said the impact from this review has so far been minimal with more transformative options not taken forward as a consensus across the chamber has not yet been reached. The peer team feel it is important the constitutional review is continued, and more fundamental change is brought forward to improve the governance structure and in particular look to rationalise the number of scrutiny and policy (overview) committees.

The relationships between members and officers are generally very healthy, with honest and open conversations had. The peer team did hear of instances though where there was a blurring of the roles and responsibilities of members and officers. An example given was around the project and financial management on certain capital projects. The member and officer protocol has helped, and it is important that this is properly embedded and that separate lines of responsibility of the two are understood.

During BDBC's last CPC in December 2013 the organisational culture was an area that was identified which required significant improvement. The culture the peer team heard described to them was very different to that highlighted in 2013. Members and officers spoke of a culture which is supportive, friendly and inclusive, and several respondents credit the Chief Executive for driving this improvement.

Whilst the organisational culture has undoubtedly improved, the council's desire to move to an empowering one still has some way to go. The peer team heard that the organisation remains hierarchal in pockets. Some respondents described the council as a "*controlled organisation*" with internal bureaucracy hindering innovation. To move to a more empowered culture this needs to be embraced by all of the wider leadership team, with systems and procedures updated to reflect this.

BDBC staff are very committed to the council and if given license will develop innovative ideas for smarter ways of working. The council could consider developing a framework to embed this new approach.

Communications are embedded across the organisation and their importance is recognised. The development of the online staff briefings have been welcomed. Whilst corporate levels of communication were generally seen as effective, there is a particular reliance on the 'Monday emailer' and on a cascade system of messaging being passed down teams. The peer team did hear that the experiences of some staff can vary depending on where they sit within the organisation. Ensuring consistency of both the quality and timing of the information shared with staff across all service areas is important. The council has a talented communications team who should look at developing more innovative ideas on BDBC's internal communications.

4.4. Financial planning and management

BDBC is in a financially strong position. Prudent financial management has resulted in significant income streams, a healthy level of reserves and no borrowing. This solid base has enabled the council to keep council tax and fees and charges low whilst resourcing BDBC's priority areas.

The council spends the third most per head of population of all district councils in the country². Its ability to do so whilst keeping the costs for the local taxpayer low is impressive.

Finances are actively managed and are led by an experienced and knowledgeable team. A long-term strategic approach to finances is adopted which is demonstrated with two-year revenue budgets being set alongside a regularly updated robust medium-term financial strategy.

The council relies on its commercial and investment income to sustain the financial stability of the authority, with approximately 35 per cent of the council's income generated in this way. The council holds significant assets, £554m at the last valuation, of which a considerable number were inherited from Basingstoke Corporation when the council was created in the 1960s.

The council is aware of its exposure to risk, such as a loss of rental income and the decrease in the capital value of assets, particularly in the current economic climate. BDBC have sought to mitigate this risk through the development of the Strategic Asset Management Plan in February 2022. This asset review sought to achieve efficiencies and improvements on the operational portfolio whilst targeting improved financial resilience on the investment portfolio. The council being in a position where it has not undertaken borrowing to fund these investments puts it in a more secure position.

The peer team were impressed with the council's internal audit and risk processes. Audit arrangements are robust; engagement was evident from across the council with activity linked to the risk register. Recommendations for improvement are

² LG Inform, Basingstoke and Deane – Headline report.
https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/view/lga-research/lga-research-report-headline-report-bar-charts?mod-area=E07000084&mod-group=AllDistrictsInCountry_England&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup

categorised by priority and followed up. Oversight from the Audit Committee appears strong.

The council has been setting two-year revenue budgets which is a good practice. This has enabled the council to focus on priority areas such as the climate change agenda and the economic recovery of the place following the pandemic. By being able to demonstrate that core services are funded in the short to medium term this provides assurances to the financial viability of the authority.

BDBC's strong financial position enables the council to put in long term investment into delivering the place based major projects such as Basing View and the leisure park.

The substantial commercial income which is being achieved - £16.7m in 2021/22 – significantly contributes to the administration's ability to make decisions such as the planned freeze of council tax and car parking charges in 2023/24. The council has also sought to bring forward additional funds to resource its priorities. Three funds were created to support climate change (£2m), economic recovery (£1m) and cost of living assistance fund (£1m).

In terms of the immediate future, the council has a clear budget strategy, which aligns with the priorities of the council. This provides clear rationale for the investment in frontline services.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

BDBC has a dedicated and passionate workforce, with staff that are proud to represent the borough and care about its communities. This was exemplified by staff exceeding expectations in responding to COVID-19. Continuing to take time to recognise and celebrate these and other successes will be important, so staff feel valued and appreciated.

The peer team heard from across the organisation the desire to continually improve. The capacity to do so exists within the council. To enable the delivery of the council's ambitions BDBC is investing in additional capacity with 22 new full-time positions budgeted for in 2022/23.

This capacity to deliver on the council's priorities is a very good position to be in. The

peer team would though encourage the council to look beyond its internal resource and try to harness the ambitions and strengths of local organisations and communities to deliver in partnership on the collective priorities. For example, Basingstoke has active climate change groups, and with this being a clear priority of BDBC, by working closer even more can be achieved.

The Programme Management Office is a good development and should provide more structure around project delivery. The peer team heard that historically the council has not always delivered major projects to time and there has been considerable slippage in the capital programme. It is important to resource the delivery team on major projects for the long-term. The peer team would encourage the council to utilise existing expertise within the council. BDBC should look to embed project management specialists beyond the narrow purpose they're being used at present.

Currently the council's policy and performance teams are in different parts of the organisation. Given how inextricably linked the two are, the peer team would suggest they come together as a team. Related to this, the peer team feel it is important there is alignment across policy, performance, human resources and organisational development in order to support change ambitions and recognising their strategic importance should report directly to the Chief Executive.

The peer team were pleased to see the importance the organisation places on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) both internally and externally. Partners were complimentary on the work the council does in providing leadership on this agenda for the place. The council has recently brought in dedicated resource on EDI which is helping to embed this work throughout the organisation. An example which demonstrates the council's commitment is its recent achievement in gaining White Ribbon accreditation – with the development of a three-year action plan to change the attitudes and cultures that lead to abuse and violence and to promote gender equality.

The council is planning to review its EDI action plan after the adoption of the new council plan. It is important to use the new census data to inform this review into the EDI objectives for the council and the borough.

BDBC is experiencing the same national trends concerning recruitment challenges. It

is in the process of developing a new people strategy, with a focus on candidate attraction and career development. The council should look at new recruitment techniques and the external marketing of BDBC. The council is in the process of concluding its review of pay and benefits, its important this is implemented quickly given the challenging recruitment climate.

The peer team felt the council could invest further in its organisational development offer. The council could do more in growing its own talent through development programmes and opportunities for structured learning and upskilling. The council could also explore further avenues such as apprenticeships, graduate schemes and internships.

5. Next steps


It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and the 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, Will Brooks, Principal Adviser for the South East, is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. Will is available to discuss any further support the council requires – william.brooks@local.gov.uk.

6. Useful resources and signposting

- Political mentoring – through the LGA's political group offices member mentors from other councils can be arranged for senior councillors. Typical mentoring engagements stretch over six months, providing the space for honest conversations, to be challenged and supported in a confidential environment.
- [Leadership Essentials programmes](#) – a series of programmes and workshops



designed as themed learning opportunities for councillors. Each event concentrates on a specific portfolio area or a specific theme.

- [National Graduate Development Programme](#) – a two-year management trainee programme offering councils a unique opportunity to grow their own local government leaders. Application window for the 2023 intake is now open, the LGA are keen to have discussions with councils that may be interested in taking graduates. A council has until the end of March 2023 to sign up for Cohort 25 (starting in autumn 2023).